

“Metamorphoses – Let Everything Happen to You”

by Adam Kleinman

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Eduardo Navarro, *Celestial Numbers*, 2018. Bread and wood, 400 x 400 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Nara Roesler, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and New York.



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Long before we, as a species, were categorized as *Homo sapiens*, Plato proclaimed humans to be “featherless bipeds.” As a retort, Diogenes grabbed a chicken, plucked it, raised it aloft, and sarcastically declared “Behold: Plato’s man!” Not be outdone, Plato added “with flat nails” to his description. Aristotle later weighed in on the matter by declaring that we are communal beings who possess language, which we use to divide the world into categories available for rational and political inspection. Though a final decision was never reached in ancient Athens, one thing is certain: these dudes were obsessed with definitions.

Considering that museums began as collections of objects grouped by kind, it could be said that they too are products of the urge to collapse reality into neat taxonomies. However, the world is a bit messier. While most humans share psychical features, we do not necessarily share similar minds, histories, or desires—and the reduction of these social characteristics into set and didactic narratives has led museums to misrepresent, and even marginalize, aspects of society and nature at the cost of privileging other figures. The group exhibition “Metamorphosis – Let Everything Happen to You,” curated by Chus Martinez at Castello di Rivoli, attempts to poke holes in anthropological and demonstrative science by asking: What if we could be a flower?

Hypotheticals aside, visitors to the exhibition are first met by a giant flower displayed on the floor. Ingela Ihrman’s *The Passion Flower* (2017), a mixed-media sculpture, is grossly over scale; its petals lie flush against ground to reveal its ovary, stigma, tendrils, and other interior bits. As a genus, the passion flower hosts vast morphological variations across several hundred species and has divergent medical and culinary uses, as well as common names and associations, from resembling Christ on the cross to the face of a clock. Towering over this suggestive specimen is the gallery itself: a very long, very tall hall, which has the proportions of an extremely pinched cathedral only a few meters wide. This setting forces the show to conform to a highly formal procession, which seems contradictory to any idea of being against fixity even though the exhibition didactics call for a return to pre-Socratic modes of thinking about nature as being in a state of flux and not a division of labor or type.

Martinez has dotted several other floral pieces by Ihrman down the center of this axis, while presentations by other artists, predominantly bracketed as zones that afford each artist their own territory, line the side walls. There is variation to this pattern: Ihrman’s works give way to *Celestial Numbers* (2018), two four-meter high wooden abacuses bearing bread beads by the artist Eduardo Navarro that take over the central spine, and are backed by Reto Pulfer’s *Theaceae’s Traum* [Theaceae’s Dream] (2008–18), a series of dyed curtains hung to divide the far end of gallery laterally by forming a set of interstitial spaces to traverse.

Theaceae are a family of flowering shrubs including the camellia. The use of the possessive in Pulfer’s title, however, makes a near-homophonic pun with Theseus, the mythological king. When considered with the sail-like elements in the installation, it brings to mind the ship of Theseus, a classic paradox in the metaphysical study of identity that asks whether a ship is still the same ship if each and every part of it were exchanged for a new part. Other references abound: the frontmost fabric is patterned to resemble a face wherein the mouth is formed by a tent-like opening to crawl through on all fours. Coupled with the scent of Navarro’s bread beads, the sensation of being eaten is matched by the childlike feeling of playing in an elaborate blanket fort while being devoured and ingested, or even birthed. After passing through the viscerally colored inner sheets, visitors arrive at a hidden last work, finding themselves in a ring of seats resembling a miniature Stonehenge. Here, they can listen to a collection of texts by various authors on the subject of displacement, scored in the Albanian iso-polyphonic style, a drone-like chant. Entitled *I Have Left You the Mountain* (2016), this project by Simon Battisti, Leah Whitman-Salkin, and Âbäke could have capped the exhibition had visitors not been forced to turn around and view the entire show in reverse before exiting. This shift produces a kind of liminality in which the order of things is put on its head, broken time and again by the recombinant exhibition plan.

Beyond invoking metamorphosis as a process that resists stratified bodies—be they literal flesh or corpses of knowledge—the exhibition entreats the visitor to “let everything happen to you.” Instead of thinking like a flower, the grand conceit here seems to be that we consider ourselves more like bees who cross-pollinate ideas, memories, and experiences in an attempt to find more sensual and symbiotic modes of adaptive relations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Kleinman is an independent curator and writer as well as the lead curator for North America at KADIST. He lives in New York.