



Things fall apart: *Lolcats* by prizewinning artist Rachel Maclean

Three women artists, all based in Scotland, make videos that offer warped, hilarious parodies of contemporary culture

**By John Beagles**

Sometimes it's difficult not to feel overwhelmingly dirty. There you sit, watching *How to Look 10 Years Younger* or yet another advert for the fake philanthropy of *The Secret Millionaire*, fascinated disgust having overtaken you in a moment of weakness, trying to shake the feeling that the future-fascist TV cutaway scenes of Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (1997) were the most prophetic moments of celluloid of the last 30 years. If Freudian disavowal once protected the psyche from the troubling pangs of illegitimate desire, today it works hard to deny the presence of this propaganda. Faced with the decadence of Babylon, artists aren't immune to self-serving careerist denial, the list of those carrying out business as usual long and litigious.

Fortunately, disavowal isn't a feature of the films of Scotland-based artists Erica Eyres, Michelle Hannah and Rachel Maclean. Working primarily with the moving image, all three revel in channelling the drives, appetites and desires of the zeitgeist. While much contemporary

work appears as if it could have been made 20 years ago, their practices are cornucopias of the demons colonising our synapses today. One suspects all three possess an insatiable appetite for trawling network spaces for the weird, the wild and the banal. Certainly, their work is replete with the grotesque ciphers of today's corporate-trash-consumerism and ghostly apparitions from popular cultures past.

A Canadian by birth, Erica Eyres first came to prominence with a series of grimly hilarious videos such as *Destiny Green* and *Baby Marleena*. The former is the darkly gothic, hyperbolic tale of a beauty-pageant queen whose obsession with the symmetrical perfection prized by celebrity culture leads her to have her nose, eyes and mouth surgically removed, in the quest for the 'ideal' face (*Eyes Without a Face* to the power of ten). In the film, Eyres inhabits a succession of grotesques – the pushy mother, the self-loathing sister – who trade in the banalities of daytime TV. Eyres displayed an engrossing, entertaining facility for character mimicry, her skill at inhabiting these 'creatures' undoubtedly the result of watching a punishing schedule of Channel 4 and 5 documentaries; an endless loop of body and mental horror. Comparably, the rationalisation for *Destiny's* radical surgery – "it's her body, her decision" – echoes such shows' familiar empty rhetoric of ersatz self-empowerment and choice.

These shows present the most extreme signs of what are actually widespread pathologies, created by what the writers Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello sardonically termed "the new spirit of capitalism". This is a world where compulsive disorders, neuroses and schizophrenia are legion. It's these psychological pathogens that percolate through Eyres work. The combined effect of her amateurish, lo-fi production (reminiscent of American public access television), often pitch-perfect characterisation and over-the-top storytelling is a darkly comic act of displacement. The nervous, awkward laughter *Destiny* generates is reminiscent of the philosopher Simon Critchley's description of Samuel Beckett's humour as "the laugh that laughs at the laugh". Eyres's upside-down parade of grotesques is, to borrow Umberto Eco's phrase, "a cold carnival".

This kind of awkwardness is most pronounced in Eyres's recent film *Pam's Dream*. In this work, Eyres stages a re-enactment of the notorious episode of *Dallas* in which a whole season is revealed to have been nothing more than a dream, but using a cast of young children. Dolled-up in fake wigs, big daft hats and shoulder pads, the distancing effect of the children's parroting of *Dallas's* dog-eat-dog sensibility is simultaneously absurd, troubling and deflationary. The work's political dimension, the knowledge that *Dallas* was the advance battalion for neoliberalism's

cultural colonisation of British TV, renders the result as sick and lucid as an episode of Channel 4's perversely sexualised child pop re-enactment show *Minipops*. However, the children's performances in *Pam's Dream* counterbalance the horror with a deflationary power. This kind of slick, fantasy capitalism, as *The Apprentice* shows us every week, is fundamentally silly; not taking it 'seriously' is, as the kids inadvertently remind us, political.

Michelle Hannah is an apocalyptic gothic medium, an intermediary between our decaying world of ossifying culture and an earlier, vital one. In a series of videos and performances, she has demonstrated a fearless ability to produce intense moments of hallucinatory displacement. Fundamental to her work has been Hannah's use of ambient, electronic drone sounds and vocal digital processing. The theorist Michel Chion has charted how sound in cinema has shifted from a secondary role of 'added value' to a more potent, primary carrier of meaning, just as in videos such as *SONNE*, *HOWDOESITFEEL* and *BLACKHOLESUN*. It is Hannah's use of sound, perhaps most memorably in the mesmerising video *JCARUS*, that creates affective dissonance and, perhaps most importantly, a simultaneous kind of romantic reverie.

While Eyres, with whom Hannah has collaborated, often inhabits multiple grotesque personae, Hannah's androgynous alter ego, with its dead-shark eyes and black cocktail dress, appears as a mutant pop diva, the bastard offspring of David Bowie and Grace Jones. She has referred to this character as a dystopian self; certainly, the impression is of a kind of Lynchian bruised cabaret act from the other side. Her slow, seemingly trancelike movements ghostly, her facial expression robotically frozen, she exists as an otherworldly pop shaman, divining on our behalf, communing with the demons, existing in a slowly pulsing half-light.

The audiovisual space Hannah creates in videos such as her reworking of the Smiths track 'How Soon is Now' in *SONNE* is troubled and troubling. Filmed in close-up, Hannah's head and body appear possessed by the spirits, her digitally manipulated voice processing Morrissey's angst into an ethereal, almost ritualistic intonation. The digital processing yields a warped vocal duality, partly robotic, partly animalistic. It is intensely affecting and haunting. Deeply uncanny, it comes from somewhere else, and might indeed take us to somewhere else. Like Eyres's grotesque parody, Hannah's reworking of old songs defamiliarises and reanimates. These are covers evacuated of fawning respect and banal nostalgia. Instead, Hannah's reimaginings, like her mongrel personae, are capable of producing new, disquieting ruptures in the now, reminding us of what's been lost in the figure of today's pop star – namely, the possibility of transformative liberation from the vicissitudes of the everyday, something absent in the dull thud of today's largely instrumental, bleached-out culture.

In a recent edition of *e-flux*, artists and writers discussed the concept of accelerationism. Steven Shaviro offers this definition: "by pushing capitalism's own internal tensions (or what Marx called its contradictions) to extremes,



Medium cool: Michelle Hannah in *HOWDOESITFEEL*

accelerationism hopes to reach a point where capitalism explodes and falls apart". There's more than a hint of an accelerationist strategy at play in Rachel Maclean's hyper-saturated, warped inversion of now. The recipient of the 2013 Margaret Tait award, Maclean stitches together a decadently attired foppish chimera mouthing the words of Katy Perry and a blue-faced, bar-coded slave speaking lines from *Snow White*.

Formally and technically, the level of ambition in Maclean's work is (by the admittedly low standards of much contemporary art) refreshing and startling. Designing and fabricating all her own costumes (Bollywood does Bosch does Bowery and Westwood), as well as shooting over lengthy periods (*Lolcats* took a year), allows Maclean to endow her intricate, deeply ambitious works with a unique formal and visual complexity.

*This kind of slick, fantasy capitalism is fundamentally silly; not taking it 'seriously' is, the kids remind us, political*



Not so stellar *Dallas*: Erica Eyres's *Pam's Dream*

Superficially, the aesthetic of her fully realised, green-screened, composite worlds is equal parts 80s pop video, 90s computer game and kids' TV show. First viewing suggests a corporate utopian theme park adorned throughout with adulterated Starbucks logos. While distinctions between past and future, human and animal are volatile and mutable in Maclean's films, the narratives of *Lolcats* and *Over the Rainbow* begin in a space where a veneer of consensual contentment pervades. Floppy-eared bunnies offer cutesy invitations: "Hi! I'm Fluffy. We could have lots of fun together." This is clearly the familiar infantilised fantasy of a utopia uncontaminated by violence and poverty. However, beneath the placid veneer, this is an infected space, and the narratives quickly turn death-dark black: mincemeat flesh spilling from fluffy fun-fur bodies and benignly smiling, saccharine princesses start snarling with fascistic malevolence. Just as the robots turned in *Westworld* and the beast-men rebelled in *Island of Lost Souls* ("Law no more!"), so the surface homogeneity rapidly dissolves. At times, the expression of all this is grimly hilarious: when replayed by one of Maclean's nightmarish chimeras, Prince William's suggestion that he and Kate are "like sort of ducks, very calm on the surface with little feet going under the water" becomes positively ghoulish. Entertaining, 'accelerated', razor-sharp allegory and parody rarely gets any better than this in the art world.

Eyres, Hannah and Maclean all trade in material that places them in some aesthetic and critical jeopardy. Their refusal to wear their cleverness on their sleeves through knowing quotation or via the now rather mannerist litany of self-reflexive nods and winks constitutes a potential handicap to being read as producers of serious, 'critical' video art. I suspect they don't care. All three have produced highly distinctive works that possess an aesthetic, cognitive and emotional intensity deliriously at odds with the often desiccated anaemia of much academic video art. They've created their own worlds, populated with their own imaginings, which are potentially far richer in generating ideas about how we might fashion an escape from this garden of earthly delights. ☺