

Nao Bustamante
2nd Floor Projects
San Francisco
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Reviewed by David Buuck

Nao Bustamante has built quite a reputation in the Bay Area and beyond for her provocative work. Known mostly as a performance artist, her work often also includes video and installation, pushing her practice beyond any particular medium into a kind of exploration of the frontiers of performance and subjective expression. In her recent exhibition at the new cutting-edge Mission space, 2nd floor Projects, she presented a brilliant new video, which itself was framed within a broader investigation into the far horizons of a psychedelic future where the fantastically silly meets the sublime.

Upon entering the one-room gallery space, visitors were immediately confronted with an ankle-high obstacle: the artist's placard sign, reading "Earth People 2507: Talk to the future® - Ask me how," was suspended just above the floor, with strings attached to the four corners of the room. The upsetting of conventional signage ("Earth People 2507" being the name of the larger project from which the video is excerpted) also reminded the viewer that one was in an installation, and not merely a screening room. Indeed, though the eye wished to immediately focus on the video projected on the far wall, to do so was to risk tripping on the exhibition's "signification" itself.

The main attraction, Bustamante's video "Untitled #1," almost defies description. That is to say, while one can run down its basic elements — psychedelic colors, frontier imagery, Mt. Rushmore, herds of buffalos, and more — the overall effect was not one that was not only greater than the "sum of its parts" but did not fit easily into the kinds of categories reviewers tend to rely on. It was "amazing," even if it is hard to say exactly how or why. Certainly the star of the video, Bustamante's toy poodle Fufu, drew the most attention. Fufu had been transformed into a dog-buffalo hybrid — a "fufalo" — and became the star of the video, often prancing through the oversaturated landscape in multiple forms and repeated clips. The opening text of the video, asking "Does a species judge time by their own passage?" helped give what might otherwise seem merely whimsical and trippy into a deeper meditation on the frontier of ecological disaster itself, where we hybrids become the decreasing bison on the disappearing landscape. Additionally, the musical score by Stephan Moore was quite bewitching, likewise splitting the difference between ominous and slyly ironic.

In addition to the video, there were several other, more subtle elements to the exhibit. On one wall Bustamante framed "Forlorn," a small drawing that detailed her directions to her dog's groomer, as to how to prepare him for his role as

“Fufalo,” including ceramic horns and some fairly intensive hair cutting. This drawing itself worked as a palimpsest, as through small holes and tears one could make out the childhood photo of the artist beneath the instructions. Next to this hung a small soft sculpture in the shape of the buffalo-poodle, as if salt had been poured into a molded white sleeve. Along the street-facing windows, Bustamante hung “Ecru,” a custom wallpaper that functioned as a kind of psychedelic curtains, full of kaleidoscopic shapes which upon further inspection revealed themselves to be patterned digital images of Fufalo. Finally, one window opened to the streaming daylight through a Plexiglas scrim covered with theater lighting gels. “Untitled (plastic sunset)” did indeed cast wondrous shapes and colors across the gallery floor and fall walls as the sun moved across the sky during each afternoon screening.

While many artist statements tend to be perfunctory overviews of the work, or perhaps venture towards making claims and contexts for how to view the work, for this show Bustamante produced a text that must be considered as artistic (and crucial to the overall understanding of the show) as the “work” itself. Her “project narrative” reads as much like an outline of a science fiction novel as it does a description of an art project, and successfully skirts the line between fact and fabrication. Calling herself a “cosmovideographer,” Bustamante charts her practice in terms of a time-traveling public servant, shot into the future in order to rethink our present moment as a species within a much broader historical narrative. Her “Earth People 2507” is thus best seen as part of a long-term intervention into future-thinking, to not only ponder the terrain of post-apocalyptic ecological disaster, but also to rethink how we might provide a kind of vehicle for time-travel that might bring possible alternative futures back to our present time and space, before it’s too late. Otherwise, when it comes time for her planned screening of her videos in 500 years (to be screened in Kansas City, where it is hoped rising sea levels will not yet have reached), there may only be a barren landscape of hybrid fufalos left to roam the barren plains.