

WINDOW SPACE



Mirage of the Sprawl

Nicole Beno

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When Eve walked among
the animals and named them—
nightingale, red-shouldered hawk,
fiddler crab, fallow deer—
I wonder if she ever wanted
them to speak back, looked into
their wide wonderful eyes and
whispered, Name me, name me.
—“A Name,” Ada Limón

Is the practice of design about revealing nature or inventing it? What do human representations of nature, found throughout the intertwined histories of art and science, tell us about ourselves and our desires? These are the key questions surfacing in Nicole Beno’s playful and mesmerizing murals, sculptures, and installations. Beno is an artist who uses the language of design to collapse boundaries between the familiar and the strange. The natural world—a source of both contemplative pleasure and existential anxiety for human subjects—is a recurring motif in her work. In *Mirage of the Sprawl*,

Beno's installation in the Window Space of Xspace Cultural Centre, Beno has created an otherworldly landscape that seems to resist interpretation as much as it compels the viewer to name it: I think I know what I'm seeing, but what is it? A garden, an aquarium, an extraterrestrial form, a nightmare? The moment one lands on an answer, the work appears to shapeshift, wobbling out of one's grasp again.

For the Surrealist movement in the early 20th century, collage was an experiment in articulating unconscious desire, particularly as it mapped onto consumer culture. In an era marked by the ascendancy of the department store, figures like André Breton, Max Ernst, and Man Ray appropriated consumer media like magazines and shop windows to develop aesthetic strategies of anticapitalist critique. As a window display, *Mirage of the Sprawl* participates in this tradition, transforming every passerby into a consumer and, at the same time, revealing the objectifying logic of that form of identification. Just as the unconscious is always already filled with images and objects of desire from the ambient visual culture, the viewer-as-consumer can't help but see themselves represented in Beno's piece, as a fragmented thing made up of sensuous blobs who is struggling toward coherence in the act of looking and consuming—a self that is alienating to behold consciously but is nevertheless embodied.

Collage is the technique that shapes the experiential effects of Beno's work. For this piece, Beno has chosen images from archival magazines and manipulated them in a repetitive scanning process that involves making a chain of copies, producing glitches and distortions. Scrambled, decontextualized, and made into fragments, the resulting images are then arranged and layered on a virtual canvas, producing forms that crystallize into a composition. While the magazine artifacts index a bygone era of print advertising and image circulation, Beno's process has resurrected them in a cyborg body. As fragments, their shapes and textures suggest just enough for us to imagine the lifeworlds they once represented. Is that a vase, and did it come from an antique or

lifestyle magazine? Are those flower petals or the folds of a protein? Eliciting a sense of teetering between failure and recognition, *Mirage of the Sprawl* can be understood as a speculative archival practice, concerned not with rescuing any authentic meanings from its source materials but rather with activating their latent aesthetic potential.

In dialogue with the department store window, another visual apparatus that *Mirage of the Sprawl* engages with is the diorama. A technology of display central to natural history museums, each diorama—with its collage of taxidermied animals, rocks, soil, and plant reproductions—is a theatrical staging of entire habitats frozen in time, presented as if a neutral window into knowledge. Donna Haraway, in her seminal analysis, notes that in every diorama there is at least one animal who looks back at the viewer, holding forever “the gaze of meeting, the moment of truth, the original encounter.”¹ The dead animal’s gaze interpellates the viewer into this scene of discovery as its ideal subject—the white Euro-American man of science, whose “fatal desire to represent, to be whole” is thus fulfilled.² Perhaps what’s so jarring about *Mirage of the Sprawl* is its capacity to invoke the materiality of the diorama while turning its ideological function on its head: I look and everywhere there is nothing that meets my gaze and confirms my humanity, my wholeness, only strange artificial shapes that whisper to me, ‘you are just like us.’ The abyss looks back, after all, in the same moment it engulfs us.

Writing on the allure of symmetries and patterns found in nature and the human tendency to represent them through form, the art historian T. J. Clark notes that form is “a way of capturing nature’s repetitiveness and making it human, making it ours—knowable and dependable.”³ At the same time, though it may be tempting to conclude that representations merely duplicate the world, Clark emphasizes with a nod

¹ Donna Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936,” *Social Text*, no. 11 (Winter 1984-1985), 25.

² *ibid.*

³ T. J. Clark, “More Theses on Feuerbach,” *Representations*, vol. 104, no. 1 (Fall 2008), 7.

to Marx, “the point is that form [...] is change.”⁴ Coordinating the rhetorics of the shop window and of the diorama, *Mirage of the Sprawl* illuminates design practice as a process of representing the world that reveals the nature of that representation to be consumption, a historically specific way of being and knowing for particular kinds of subjects. But its collage aesthetic, its amorphous and unsettling vibrancy, also temporarily breaks the circuit of self-making that relies on consuming the other, throwing the very self that beholds it into uncertainty and potential dissolution.

Such a break doesn’t need to involve a bad feeling. It can be pleasurable, too. Through the form of the collage, *Mirage of the Sprawl* refracts the graphic vocabulary of magazine advertising to create a scene of nature where fragments of desire come alive. Shattering any self-affirming illusions of mastery over the other, Beno’s piece and the world it calls into being, with its glossy, metallic, fabric-like surfaces, nevertheless shimmer with potentiality. It invites us to indulge our senses, anticipate being changed and, like Eve in Limón’s poem, be open to being named otherwise.

– Coco Zhou

⁴ ibid.