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### 'Island' forecasts a bleak future

BY FABIOLA SANTIAGO

Something extraordinary is afoot in *The Possibility of an Island*: stacked rocks defy the law of gravity; mournful synthetic plants are dressed in ragged silver and red lamé, and a Miami artist who claims he was "transmitted" into membership in the Raelian movement presents a prototype for the tiled floor of a UFO embassy.

Inspired by the French writer Michel Houellebecq's novel of the same title, the exhibition at MOCA at Goldman Warehouse, the Museum of Contemporary Art's Wynwood annex, blurs the line between reality and fiction -- and projects a bleak and solitary future.

The story that inspired curator Ruba Katrib to assemble the exhibition of artists with an affinity for science fiction is told in the voice of a man named Daniel, a middle-aged, successful but unhappy comedian, and two futuristic clones, Daniel24 and Daniel25. The present-day setting is 2003 France during the record heat wave that killed almost 15,000 people, most of them elderly and living alone.

"It's become a cult book among artists," Katrib says. "It's really rich, almost like a Bible, but a really messed-up version, brutally raw and honest, and it can be offensive. . . . He holds a mirror to society, and it's not pleasant."

Like the book, the MOCA show delves into issues of beauty and desire, eternal life and destruction, the power of belief systems, cults and religions and the excesses of global culture. It confronts our youth-obsessed society, the self-absorbed "island" we have become in the age of technology. It predicts, Katrib notes, "how our misery will grow."

### MIAMI ARTISTS

A slate of international artists exhibits alongside three Miamians who debut works.

Nicolas Lobo, the Raelian member, exhibits *Floor Tiles for the Future Raelian Embassy*, a terrazzo, black plastic and brass ensemble that deals with how easily people can be convinced to believe in something.

Martin Oppel's sculptures made from real and man-made rocks -- *Strata Fiction A*, *Strata Fiction C*, and *Strata Fiction D* -- appear to manipulate the laws of nature (and make the cynic wonder if *Strata Fiction B* was abducted by one of Lobo's aliens). Cristina Lei Rodríguez's post-apocalyptic installation questions beauty and opens the show.

One of Rodríguez's pieces, *Desire*, bears an eerie resemblance to the delusional wealthy women from the Hamptons featured in another work, the video *Forever* by Dutch artist Julika Rudelius. These 60something women, portrayed on split-screens, have endured thousands of dollars in plastic surgery, but when they speak of their lives, hopes and dreams, they claim not to have any issues with beauty or self-image. The 16-minute video is painful to watch, and, again, the cynic leaves thinking there's only one way to age gracefully -- without all that makeup and with an abundance of humility.

Many of the works test or manipulate technology.

In *Apple GarageBand Auto tune Demonstration*, New York artist Cory Arcangel puts footage of Jimi Hendrix's 1969 rendition of the *Star Spangled Banner* through Apple software to "correct" the sound, thus diminishing the individuality of the singer's famous Woodstock performance. The soundtrack can be excruciating, but Hendrix's powerful persona keeps the listener hooked.

In *The Varieties of Experience*, Los Angeles artist Mungo Thomson projects on a wall the dust particles and residue of a 16-millimeter film loop in reverse, and few who watch the white "celestial" sparks in black space won't be tempted to ask: "When does the film start?"

The mural *Negative Space* in the show's opening gallery is also the result of a reversal, this time of a Hubble image of outer space that Thomson downloaded from the NASA website. The work is now part of MOCA's collection.

"It's on a disc, and we can reproduce it anywhere we want, and there are no storage problems," says Bonnie Clearwater, MOMA's executive director.

The universe on a disc?

Across from the negative celestial image is a wall of upside-down teardrops in shades of gray and black, the work of Singapore artist Heman Chong who also exhibits *Time Out (Euroasia)*, a mock cover for the popular travel guide that features a homogenized view of an anonymous city.

If anyone doubts that this is otherworldly territory, he only has to open the curtains to a darkened room, and the Paris artist collective Claire Fontaine beams in huge white neon letters a desperate "PLEASE COME BACK."

The message is activated by sensors, depending on the viewer's behavior to deliver its punch.

"You can interpret that anyway you wish," Katrib says.

What's tougher is to unearth from this desolate landscape a ray of hope.

The young people from Guangzhou, China, in Cao Fei's video *Cosplayers* dress as Manga characters in fluorescent intergalactic suits and wigs and play out, swords and all, the roles of the characters in television, movies and comic books. But when they return in their costumes to their domestic environments, they seem alienated, unmotivated, unnoticed by family. Every family member is separate, an island: father with his face hidden behind a newspaper, siblings engrossed in TV, mother sewing.

And the message gets even more dire: Matias Faldbakken from Oslo foreshadows the end of the printed word in *Untitled (Newsprint #1)*, an apparent mausoleum for dead newspapers.

In Houellebecq's book, Daniel breaks away from the cult that has enslaved him and other "neohumans" and finds, if not happiness, at least peace in the sameness of his days on an island. One could think of that scenario as a depressive's happy ending, or given the alternatives, even nirvana.

Katrib also hopes that viewers of *The Possibility of an Island* can find a reason for hope. Maybe Chris Kraus' film *Gravity and Grace*, delivers a flicker.

"The trick," a patron in a bar advises, "is to keep your own direction."

And, in fact, there's a lot to celebrate in *Waxing Crescent*, Los Angeles painter Kim Fisher's poetic oil on linen, the most beautiful piece in the show and one of its few uplifting images.

The painting is part of a series that interprets the phases of the moon. In the Spanish fan-like shape she gives this version, the composition retains a certain celestial pulchritude, even when the mirror-like slivers of the moon-fan are quizzical, disjointed.

## **NOT JUST BLACK**

Katrib notes that although the painting's dominant color is black, Fisher never applies it specifically but creates it from a mix of hues. There is also a fashionable, grunge beauty to the way she lets the irregularly cut linen drape beyond the painting.

No one walks out of *The Possibility of an Island* free of mixed feelings -- twinges of anxiety and concern about the state of the world plus admiration for the creative spirit and the power of art to point the finger. Something is afoot in *The Possibility of an Island*, and it's an eerie reflection of us.