Neanderthals on Reality TV: Looking to the Past to Understand the Future

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Human's close cousins, Neanderthals, became extinct because the climate warmed and they were not able to adapt. Similarly, our climate is heating up, although this time it is changing much faster and we will certainly not be the same. I speculate that a way that humans will behave in the far future can be understood by looking at how Neanderthals behaved in the past. I will ask questions about how they perceived the world in order to imagine how future humans might perceive the world. For example, did Neanderthals believe in a flat or round earth? Did they see themselves as different or the same as other animals? Did they accept monogamy and heterosexuality as the norm, or were they pansexual polyamorous individuals? Did they have

gender? Did they see life as bleak suffering or beautiful growth? By creating paintings that draw on these themes, and using iconography from cave paintings, I hope to create a series of paintings that causes the viewer to see how we may have a primitive future, and to see the beauty in that.

Often, traditional Western European ideals are imposed such as racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia onto people who there is no reason to believe followed these rules. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, postmodernism has begun to deconstruct these structures and allowed us to begin to imagine a world without them. By using this new imagination to look at the past I can develop an image of a world that is not constrained by structural racism, ableism, sexism, or even capitalism. As we draw closer to being able to imagine this world, we also draw closer to the Apocalypse because of manmade global climate change. As a species, we have enough resources to feed, clothe, house, and heal almost every person on the planet, but we have not done so and there is less and less time to do so as the world is quickly coming to an end. Accepting the impending apocalypse allows a kind of freedom because there seems to be little to lose, so by offering these images from the past I will inspire action towards change for the near future.

The Exhibition

I have created a series of paintings of figures and objects against a flat one-color background. The figures are outlined in bold black line and are in a cartoonish style similar to Keith Haring, with the insides of the figures being white while the background is a field of solid orange, purple, green, or yellow. The images themselves are in a flat plane and depict various hypothetical events involving themes of prehistory and science fiction. For example, the painting

"*EARNEST*" depicts a *homo erectus* throwing a dart with an atlatl (prehistoric spear thrower) at an alien from *The Simpsons* in a spaceship. In addition, there is a diorama of a life-size human skeleton modified to look like a neanderthal skeleton throwing a dart from a clear acrylic atlatl. This diorama serves as a touchstone between the extreme abstraction of the paintings and the historical grounding of the subject matter.

The purpose of this project is to use the far past as a lens to examine the near future. The last extinction of humans took place around 40,000 years ago with the wiping out of *homo neanderthalis*, although it is unclear how that species became extinct. Popular theories include being unable to adapt to climate change, being outcompeted by *homo sapiens*, being massacred by *homo sapiens*, and interbreeding with *homo sapiens* until the two groups were indistinguishable from each other. In addition, there are less popular theories on places like reddit that claim that perhaps Neanderthals were part of an ancient alien experiment to create intelligent life, but because they bred with *homo sapiens*, the bloodline became "impure" and therefore Neanderthals needed to be eliminated for the rest of the experiment to go on. In contemporary times, *homo sapiens* are facing extinction due to manmade global climate change. I will use theories of the Neanderthal extinction to make sense of this current extinction as something very real but also very confusing and perspective-distorting.

Queer Formalism is an art movement that picks up what Abstract Expressionism (AbEx) leaves unfinished. QF uses gestural expression of the body to paint with bodies that have not been traditionally given space in AbEx. AbEx was about white masculine gestures to show their power over everyone else. "Camp is alive to a sense of the doubled, and same-old-same-old AbEx was ripe for double détournement," according to Amy Sillman in an essay on

ArtForum(Sillman 2011). She means that by using similar gestures and expressions to AbEx, Queer Formalists are hijacking that language to create art that is academic but funny in an in-your-face, camp way. AbEx used body gestures to assert power, but Queer Formalism takes the formal elements of working in such an expressive manner and challenges the masculine seriousness of the genre with subversive subject matter and funny imagery.

> "Many artists—not least of them women and queers—are currently recomplicating the terrain of gestural, messy, physical, chromatic, embodied, handmade practices. I would argue that this is because AbEx already *had* something to do with the politics of the body, and that it was all the more tempting once it seemed to have been shut down by its own rhetoric, rendered mythically straight and male in quotation marks.(Sillman 2011) "

Because AbEx has been associated with the straight white and masculine body for so long, challenging the genre becomes subversive and queer when it is queer bodies who are doing the making.

At the same time, Queer Formalism is a paradox. The word "formalism" places centrality on form, while the word "queer" implies a lack of centrality of anything: queer rejects authority while formalism is beholden to structural design and composition. William J. Simmons believes that this paradox creates a type of power, as "queerness 'represents' an unsure mixture of singular embodiment and a passionate ownership of one's identity with the refusal of singularity.(Simmons 2013) " This style is able to celebrate the individual for uniqueness while universalizing the human condition. The formalism is what allows for institutional critique as it shows that the artist understands and accepts the history of art until the present day, but also sees how changes can be made to improve it. The word "queer" is fraught because it is to some

considered a slur, but in academia it is used to mean something similar to "subvert." Being queer can place a person in danger, while being a formalist does not. Therefore, Queer Formalism grounds the expansive concept of queerness with formalism, a word that refers to a method of critique rooted in technique and visual aspects instead of subject matter. In this way the two words work together very well, as queerness is a rejection of the subject and formalism is a rejection of the importance of subject matter.

Nicole Eisenman, an American artist who combines figuration and abstraction to portray utopias and dystopias that reflect the contemporary world, uses queer formalism to her advenatage. Her painting *Beer Garden at Night* uses imagery from Renoir's painting *Bau de moulin de Gallette* of a space of leisure and socialization, replaced with contemporary New York characters, to explore themes of queerness, isolation, and community.(Anonymous2015) Eisenman describes them as "people having a good time, but they have reached that tipping point" between enjoyment and sorrow.(Simmons 2013) The drinking figures are flanked by string lights and fences that serve to illuminate and contain the space, isolating it from the dark outside world. The mostly androgynous figures talk, flirt, play footsie, and the central two figures, an androgynous brunette and the personification of death, kiss without any observation from their peers who are all focused on each other. The figures are focused on creating small connections and little pleasures. "The use of paint is brutal and tender at the same time; it creates hyperrealism, sparing no one from the staining, at times disfiguring, painterly mark that nonetheless unites the figures in a whirlwind of passionate despondence and play.(Simmons 2013) " It is this freedom, from society and from onlookers, that makes the painting queer as figures are able to explore their own pleasures free from oppression. The formalism comes from

the reference to grandiose historical paintings, and the queerness comes from the subject matter, which combine to tell a story about people who create their own space to pursue pleasure away from the prying eyes of oppressive society.



(*Beer Garden at Night,* 2007, oil on canvas)

Tala Madani is an Iranian artist based in Los Angeles who creates simple, gestural figures in vulgar and absurd situations to explore themes of privacy, autonomy, ritual, and desire. Her mostly male, portly, Middle-Eastern figures are nude and smearing bodily fluid on each other, ejaculating, or exposing their anuses. The figures are often against a flat background, so they end

up in an uncertain location or a dreamspace, which brings up the subject of privacy. Madani states that “When the characters are naked, it's usually in relation to depicting them in private interior spaces.(Das and Madani 2019) ” The light that shines from cell phones, ovens, spotlights, and rear ends illuminates the themes of privacy and voyeurism, as the figures are engaged in private acts, “but the soft glow of these figures against the surrounding dark has an illusionistic power, implying the viewer’s presence in the shadows.(Kroeber 2016, 159-160) ” The ambiguity of surveillance along with the dark impulses and actions portrayed in Madani’s paintings force the viewer to imagine a world where pleasure is valued over pride, where the figures humiliate themselves in a way that gives them pleasure, but takes away their power. These middle aged men are robbed of their power and infantilized, and when they are depicted in intelligible spaces, they are prison cells and parking lots: “stifling and prison-like. These are fragments of a unified or even totalitarian world that reveal no outside context.(Bourriaud and Shindler 2017) ” The figures all think alike and act alike, performing group rituals under the surveillance of the soft light that exposes their actions as juvenile, turning grown men into babies. The formal act of her painting censors, abstracts, or smears over graphic imagery. She uses urine, feces, and vomit in the service of mark-making and to appeal to a sense of universality; “we are furnished with the idea that bodily excretions may be the most primeval of all painting tools, placing the origins of painting not in the caves at Lascaux, but in infants finger-painting with their own faeces, pictures pissed in the snow, and blood smeared on bodies in preparation for war.(Bourriaud and Shindler 2017) ” Madani’s gestural exploration of power and excretion relates to ideas that have been taking form since Dadaism when Marcel Duchamp unveiled his *Fountain* (1917) and among other things asserted that art is waste. “Madani takes

aim at Abstract Expressionism … in which representational imagery is partially occluded by splatters of black paint … which summon up the violence at work beneath the surface of Ab Ex's romanticized creative paroxysms.(Spinks 2014, 71-76) ” This aim at Abstract Expressionism is intended not to denounce the movement, but instead to engage with the formal techniques while subverting the old misogynist connotations. She builds on the foundation created by AbEx. Her paintings, which are cartoonish, gestural, figurative, and obscene, use the visual language to take away power from authority while spotlighting private eroticisms.



(*The Primitive*, 2015, oil on linen)

Dana Schutz[1] is an American artist based in Brooklyn, New York whose paintings gleefully depict the body at its most grotesque and unformed. In the painting *Civil Planning* (2004), figures use the human body as a building material, literally creating a new body to be used as a tool and shelter. At the same time, the figures in the foreground are so focused on their own tasks that they ignore the environment around them, which includes "a functioning society… medicine, art, and an overarching government or religion, represented by two oval mirrors" which also implies surveillance.(Mieves 2013, 79-96) The body is being built to protect and suit the needs of the two figures, who cannot see that it is already being eaten by dark blue "self-eater" figures in the background. Schutz objectifies the body and uses its parts to express a means of survival and tools to be used. This alludes to the objectification of the body in capitalism, but also suggests a freedom from oppression inherent within the body. In her series *Self-Eaters*, Schutz paints people who eat their own bodies is a self-destructive act of self-sufficiency. Her compositions look back to Wassily Kandinsky and Helen Frankenthaler in their structured shapes arranged into abstract gestures, while often depicting the human body. She uses these confident brushstrokes to depict a form of embodied becoming, creating figures and scenes that are messy and intentionally not whole.(Mieves 2013, 79-96)

[1] It is imperative to mention the controversy surrounding Schutz's contribution to the 2017 Whitney Biennale, *Open Casket* (2016), which depicts the corpse of Emmett Till with a mangled face and which was received with a great deal of backlash from antiracist activists, who asserted that "it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute black suffering into profit and fun." I personally find this work offensive and racist, and I believe that until Schutz apologizes and makes reparations for her actions, her work after that painting should be boycotted. That being said, this paper is not about race as that is simply a subject that would take as long as the rest of the paper to grapple with, and Schutz's work represents Queer Formalism in a unique and intriguing way. For that reason, I will only talk about her pre-2016 paintings and I acknowledge the pain that she has caused by creating the ill-conceived painting.



In order to understand the Neanderthal extinction, we must understand Neanderthal culture and beliefs, which is an impossible task without a written historical record. All that can be understood about our late ancestors is found in the material record: stone tools, bones, and markings in caves. “The further we move back in time from the solid footing of the early historical era, the less do ritual and religion resemble our common understandings of them. If we want to trace the origins and early evolution of ritual and religion, we must let go of … expectations about what religion and ritual ought to have looked like.(Wightman 2014) ” Even looking at contemporary hunter-gatherer societies is not the same as trying to understand Paleolithic beliefs, because they have had forty thousand years to develop and change their culture since then. This distance in time, and this dearth of material record, illuminates the ways that the present may communicate itself to a distant future.

How will future archaeologists or aliens look at the present moment in 2019? The answer comes from how contemporary archaeologists look at the past forty thousand years ago. By interpreting the scarce material record, it becomes possible to see the patterns that develop through repetition of materials.

"It was during the "speciation era" (i.e., from about 2.5 mya down to about 150 kya) that increasingly complex interactions of hominins with their environments encouraged the emergence of patterned behaviors, which in turn were reinforced by increasing materiality. Some of those patterned behaviors came to be associated with ideas and feelings about power, loss, the individual and the "group," right and wrong ways of doing things, and feelings of safety, comfort, vulnerability, and danger, all of which underpinned the gradual emergence of beliefs and practices of a recognizably religious nature.(Wightman 2014) "

Beliefs were not shaped by the objects around the early humans, but their imagination was limited to the material world around them, the same as it is today. To make an object a 'ritual object,' it must take on a meaning beyond its use value. Ochre has a well documented use as an adhesive and a sun protectant, but when Neanderthals buried their dead in the earth with a piece of red ochre, it took on a new, ritual, meaning associated with death and the body.(Hodgskiss 2015) When rituals are enacted, they are embodied. Because the body is taking action in a repeated way and then associating that action with something metaphysical, no ritual can happen without the body. In the case of the Neanderthal burial, the corpse becomes associated with the person that used to be alive and occupying that body, and they believed that by placing the ochre in the grave they were affecting the body in some way beyond the physical.

That is to say, there is a lot of information to be gleaned from the material Paleolithic record, but much will never be understood.

It is enough to know that Neanderthals had language and metaphysical beliefs, even if we will never know what those beliefs are. In the same way, we cannot expect our contemporary historical record to remain intact and intelligible. With an impending near future of natural disasters, war, and possible near extinction, our material artifacts will become distorted, decayed, and destroyed over thousands of years. Roland Barthes, a French theorist, categorized the world he saw according to the mythologies and rituals surrounding material objects. “I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals; I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object.(Barthes 1957) ” As more materials are created to make life take less physical work, the meanings that we assign to objects become even more embodied. A car becomes an extension of legs as a transportation device, the same way that a cathedral became an extension of a group into a community with God. A thing is never just a thing, it takes on meaning as it relates to the body.

In the Paleolithic area, meaning was assigned to objects based only on its relation to the body. In 2019, objects are assigned embodied meaning but also monetary value tied to the international market. The buying and selling of goods and services privately and for profit is a relatively new invention, as it is unlikely that before agrarianism people ever needed to store things for long periods, so they never thought of objects as ‘belonging’ to them as individuals. An object belonged to the community, and the community was able to share that object with other groups. In a parallel vein of thought, the idea that human beings belong to the species *homo*

sapiens, and that this species is totally unique, did not exist forty thousand years ago. It is extremely clear from genetic evidence that *homo sapiens, homo neanderthalis, homo denisovan,* and possibly other species, all interbred with each other and often had families together. It is likely that Neanderthals saw humans as tall, skinny, tiny browed Neanderthals. In addition, much of early cave art by humans and Neanderthals is of animals, even though the paintings are deep in caves where they almost never see light.(Marris 2018) It is impossible to know for sure, but it is likely that they saw themselves as no different than animals, as consciousness in a different embodied shape.

The ritual of creating art is one of the oldest there is. In trying to imagine how Neanderthals felt about becoming extinct, I had to think about how they became extinct, whether they understood it was happening, and whether they thought they would be remembered by future generations. I think that something that differentiates the contemporary from the Paleolithis is that right now we absolutely do try to be remembered, to leave a historical record for the future. It is unlikely that Paleolithic groups did this beyond hoping that the skills they learned would be passed on and improved upon. There is no way to know that Neanderthals knew they were becoming extinct, or whether they thought that their children were adapting to the changing climate as they interbred with *homo sapiens*.

By using the embodied ritual of painting on canvas, I am confronting the ways that actions, bodies, and meaning changes through time. Using Neanderthals and their history as a guide, I speculate and conceptualize the near-future potential extinction of humanity. These paintings serve as a warning signal for people to come to terms with what we are about to experience. Queer Formalism, with its roots in Abstract Expressionism, uses the human body as

a subject and a medium, creating expressive, gestural works that depict people living out their desires and fantasies. I use Queer Formalism to show Neanderthals living their lives. The paintings have strong black lines to depict the figures, and the inside of the figures and objects is white while the background of the paintings is bright colors. While the black lines of the figures drip and bleed into the background, their bodies remain solid. In addition, there is a sculpture of a skeleton with glowing red eyes pointing a clear acrylic atlatl at the viewer in the space. The skeleton has been modified from human to Neanderthal with very few alterations, demonstrating the insignificant differences between the species. This extinct dead skeleton is taking aim at the audience, mirroring a similar action depicted in two of the paintings. Every figure in these paintings is taking an active role in a life that is completely unknown to contemporary humans. We can determine what how Paleolithic people survived, and what they assigned value to, but not why they assigned value to objects, and not how they related to each other. In 2019, we cannot know what future archaeologists will find in the material record about our lives. If we do not know how Neanderthals felt about each other, how could anyone know how we feel about each other? In asking that question, I challenge viewers to ask themselves how they feel they relate to the world, and whether they would be proud to be remembered for what they have materially left behind.

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Ending Thoughts

This paper has been a long hike up a mountain: exhausting but ultimately satisfying. I am proud of what I wrote, but I also know that it is not comprehensive. If I were to go on to create more work about this topic in the future, and I think I will, there are some more aspects that I would like to touch on. What kinds of artifacts will actually survive another forty thousand years? Will digital media be able to survive, or will the digital and paper records be erased so the only things left are nuclear waste, sewers and subways? How does the fact that most cave art existed in deep dark caves only accessible from firelight change the way that it was interacted with? I could continue for a while. I really think that this has been a rewarding journey, and I am thankful to Byron Rich and Ian F. Thomas for being my first and second readers, as well as the whole art department for giving me the space, freedom, and guidance to succeed as a creator and making me feel welcome in the department for five years. I am truly thankful for my time here.