

L'OFFICIEL ART

Dana-Fiona Armour Translates Art Using Biotech

Artist Dana-Fiona Armour's work seeks to forge communication within and between species. Curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud gets to the heart of the matter.

11.21.2022 by Nicolas Bourriaud



Dana-Fiona Armour photographed by Pauline Abascal in the Project MC1R installation.

For contemporary science, there are no such things as isolated objects: but if everything that exists emerges from a relationship, if nothing is a simple "thing," what about artworks? Dana-Fiona Armour inoculates her genes to plants, mixes pig skin with marble slabs, and uses VR to get into roots. The young German artist belongs to a generation for whom reality reconfigures itself permanently. Artists today are becoming translators—not unlike the Amazonian shaman, who crosses different worlds and formalizes relations with animal interlocutors. Nature, as art, has become a space of negotiation and a huge interspecies dialogue.

NICOLAS BOURRIAUD: *The first time I saw your work was the day you applied for a Masters at Beaux-Arts de Paris, coming from Germany. It was obvious that you did not have the standard profile. I was wondering what circumstances led you to the French art scene, and, more generally, what inspired you to become an artist.*

DANA-FIONA ARMOUR: As a child, I felt the urge to make art quite early. At the age of six I made my first stone carved sculptures and ceramics; later on I had the opportunity to go to a school that specializes in art. This background allowed me to develop a more refined approach to sculpture and art history. My first visual shock was an encounter with a work at the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin, Franz von Stuck's "The Sin," which is a nude of Eve with a large serpent wrapped around her body. I was obsessed with the beauty of this symbolist painting, and I couldn't help but wonder about the interspecies relation—the fusion of both skins, reptile and human, repulsing and fascinating at the same time. I think this early aesthetic experience might have been a seed for my later body of work. Having a strong bond to animals and nature from growing up in the German countryside, [I had to decide] between art and veterinary medicine studies, but finally applied to the Beaux-Arts de Paris after having spent some time in France.



Project MC1R, Installation view, Collection Lambert, Avignon, France, 2022. Photography by David Giancatarina.

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Project MC1R, Installation view, Collection Lambert, Avignon, France, 2022. Photograph by David Giancatarina.

NB: *You have a scientific approach to the world—measurements and quantities, exactness, collaboration with scientists and laboratories. Do you consider yourself a kind of parascientist?*

DFA: "Parascience" is an interesting term to describe the early research I did in Paris. I experimented with organic and synthetic matter. My studio became a kind of laboratory, where different entities created a symbiosis, turning into uncanny hybrid objects—far away from the classical scientific approach. Today, I'd like to consider myself more as an artist-slash-researcher. I had the unique opportunity to collaborate with the biotechnology company Celectis for my current exhibition *MC1R Project*, which uses the latest achievements of gene-editing technology. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined being able to use those tools and integrate them into my work. The role of the artist is changing; we live in a world where collaboration is becoming more and more frequent. It is the future. At least I'd like to believe that. It is already a common practice in the scientific sector, and it's spreading to the art world. For my latest works, I have collaborated with biotechnologists, doctors, sound engineers, and motion designers. This approach allows me to imagine a global composition without technical limitations, extending the borders of sciences and arts. The results were intriguing, not only from an artistic point of view, but also from a scientific one.

NB: At an early stage, your work was somehow insisting on repulsive forms, on the borders of the disgusting or the shocking: I remember the vomit you photographed in the streets of Paris... Were you struggling with the common, "official" idea of the human body, and searching for forms that would enlarge our definition of it?

DFA: Our society celebrates a certain cleanliness... a standardized vision of both bodies and products, which are traded as commodities. Those bodies (human and non-human) are fragmented, digitalized, pulverized—a presumed body without organs. By dividing the body into fragments, I intend to examine its composition throughout my works. In our hyper-civilized nature, we no longer see those abject elements, and my attempt was to reinstall a connection with them by using a sublimating approach, which would make it possible for the viewer to reconnect with the true inner self. The oppression and neglect of this self (as is the case in most Western societies) may lead to frustration and dysmorphic disorder. As Georges Bataille states in *Abjection and Miserable Forms*: "In the final analysis, oppressors must be reduced to sovereignty in its individual form: on the contrary, the oppressed are formed out of the amorphous and immense mass of the wretched population."



Dana-Fiona Armour in the laboratory at BIAM (Bioscience and Biotechnology Institute of Aix-Marseille), France, 2022.

NB: Your idea of studying the composition of the human body, sublimating the fluid rejections, makes your reference to Georges Bataille very relevant. Actually, Bataille saw eroticism as a way for human beings, who are discontinuous, in other words individuals, to reconnect to a continuity. And, by the way, the Franz von Stuck painting you refer to, "The Sin," is also an erotic image... Isn't your interest for fragments, inoculations, and agglomerations lined with a search for continuities? I am thinking about the experiment you led with a tobacco plant, but also, more generally, to your use of materials coming from different spheres, from animal organs to bone powders to marble.

DFA: As you have marked out, building a new entity from fragments and this creation becoming a so-called "continuity" has been my possible aim over the past few years. The inoculation of a single human gene into a tobacco plant is also somewhat a process of (in-vitro) procreation: the creation of a new life form, a hybrid species that is non-existent in botanical history. Here humanity is infiltrated as a virus. Quite a narcissistic operation... This urge to create new life forms by genetic manipulation, and the domestication of nature, dates back to the 1700s. The term "genetics" is derived from the Greek, meaning "to generate." Selectively breeding to improve livestock and plant foods is deeply rooted in human behavior. But "continuity" also evokes a fluidity of matter and an infinite circulation of all elements, creating unity among all terrestrial beings.

By using materials from different spheres such as marble, animal bone powder, melanin powder, and glass, I am seeking to put the ensemble of matter and species on the same level. I want to create an inter-species dialogue, a new relationship (as is the case for *MC1R Project*) that will extinguish the frontiers between the human and the non-human.

NB: Why is it so important for you to erase or blur those borders?

DFA: Catastrophes such as wildfires, droughts, pandemics, and species extinction have become more and more recurrent. We see ourselves as the "lords and masters of nature;" you have used this allusion to René Descartes in the prologue of your exhibition *Planet B: Climate Change & the New Sublime*. The Capitalocene and the Anthropocene, both arms of destruction, are ravaging the world as we know it. In order to change this devastating prognosis, we have to find a way to coexist, to install the notion of inter-species justice, to leave human exceptionalism in favor of a real "multispeciesism." By attempting to erase or blur those borders between the human and the non-human, I am aiming to raise awareness of our condition. For example, we share 98 percent of our DNA with pigs, and plants emit informative airborne sounds under stress. I used those ultrasounds to compose the soundscapes of *MC1R Project*. We have to address those facts, continue our research in the scientific and artistic fields, reconsider ingrained theories, and redefine our understanding of the world. I might be an idealist, but I am still hoping that we can change the collective consciousness while there is still time.

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NB: As you are showing the world a negotiation between species, do you see yourself as a kind of translator? Shamans are this, in a way. They communicate between other animal or plant spheres.

DFA: We are facing a total alienation from nature, and this is becoming dangerous. I think it's necessary to act as a sort of translator or shaman between animals, plants, and humans. My artistic research intends to operate as a sort of intersection, giving a voice to the unheard and to render the invisible visible. Animals are capable of communicating in an interspecies-dialogue. Plants are able to communicate with animals. There are numerous examples for cross-species communication in the animal kingdom. A cactus, *Espostoa frutescens*, is capable of emitting ultrasounds that help bats with pollination. Horses can differentiate between aggressive or harmless barking by dogs. They even share similar facial expressions and matched behaviors when playing together, mirroring each other. They find a way of playing on a common ground that is enjoyable for both. I suppose we can learn from such examples in order to install an improved interspecies-communication.

NB: And where do you position yourself, as a human being? Where is your personal history located in this process? I am wondering if this question is still relevant, or if the artist's ego has lost its meaning.

DFA: The meaning of ego seems to be indeed displaced now, even though it never felt so present and immediate. Wouldn't we be better off leaving our egos aside to cultivate a certain humbleness, especially when facing the grandeur of nature? Isn't the ego destroying the original message of the arts? But then, who am I to judge?