

Katherine Behar *E-Waste*

Eyedrum, Atlanta

Matt Haffner *The Old Gods and Their Crumbling City*

Whitespace Gallery, Atlanta

What does it mean to throw something away? What, or who, is disposable? To qualify, a thing must first be deemed undesirable, no longer useful, or simply be given up upon. Where it goes after its disposal, and who oversees it, involve a series of decisions, each with its own social, environmental, or economic implications. Two shows on view in Atlanta this spring, Katherine Behar's *E-Waste* [April 3–May 3, 2015] and Matt Haffner's *The Old Gods and Their Crumbling City* [April 3–May 9, 2015], grapple with questions of riddance and loss, the potential of bad decisions—and bad policy—and related changes in cultural narratives.

Originally exhibited at the Tuska Center for Contemporary Art at the University of Kentucky, Behar's solo staging at Eyedrum Art and Music Gallery, a downtown nonprofit space, creates a world in which discarded electronics exist on their own, after the end of humans. Rainbow-colored scrolling text on a tablet screen greets visitors to the show: "The factories finally grow so large that the planet can no longer support their weight. It starts with a simple sinkhole in Shenzhen." Incorporating video, hand- and machine-made sculpture, and text, the three discrete installations comprising Behar's *E-Waste* encourage the viewer to affectively engage with techno-detritus. As she says in her artist statement, the show is about "[e]liciting sympathy for the devices."

The bulk of *E-Waste* is a semicircular arrangement of families of digital creatures made up of USB peripherals, which Behar simply calls "models," on the gallery floor. With names such as BK3F, FN, LED, 4HB, ACP2F, SPK, UCM, and UTGN, the models chirp and buzz at each other. Some squirm and wriggle. Watching these devices, I noticed that I do not have the vocabulary to describe my nonetheless palpable affection for them. It is unclear whether they fall into the category of human or animal fondness; anthropomorphizing them would surely fail to meet these entities on their own terms. The sculptural installation *3D-&&* (2014) begs to be approached as a swarm of mice searching for food, even comfort. Elsewhere, a 3-D printer knits "scarab" shells for Behar's models out of PLA filament, as three motors buzz out "M-O-M-M-Y" and "D-A-D-D-Y" using Morse code—a by and large foreign mechanical language today, used here to express very familiar human terms.

Behar's *Modeling Big Data* (2014) is a series of four videos, each titled after a particular computer-derived term. In both *Clicks* and *Buffering* Behar wears a cos-

tume made of pink egg crate foam as she performs an "obese, over-grown data body" in a sparse red room containing a red couch. In *Cached* and *Pings*, she dons grey-speckled fabric against the backdrop of a gray-toned room containing only a lamp. In each work, Behar's hefty data body demonstrates the video's titular digital action; what the viewer sees, however, is a blob in a solitary cell—livestock in a data-hoarding server farm.

Opening on the same date as Behar's digital bestiary was Matt Haffner's *The Old Gods and Their Crumbling City*, a solo Whitespace Gallery exhibition that depicts another post-apocalyptic vision. Sourcing mythological symbols and structures from multiple cultures and histories—Norse, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Irish, and American traditions are all traceable in the work—Haffner's mixed media constructions update ancient gods and their animal counterparts, placing them in today's dismal world. Paper cockroaches swarm recesses of the gallery. Metal crows overrun a patio.

Haffner's reference to multiple cultural narratives is intriguing as an attempt to reflect the pluralistic contemporary American city. Intervening on today's urban environment with various mythologies may be a rich approach, but these images are also reproductions of stereotypical media representations of urban blight and its inhabitants. Works made from salvaged materials—"discarded street signs, repurposed cardboard, wheat-pasted newspapers, reclaimed plywood, and rusted metal," as Haffner's artist statement describes them—reflect the former street artist's aesthetic background, yet feel problematic when removed from their urban setting and placed in a commercial gallery context. Haffner's "failed gods" are racialized; figures such as *Lesser God (The God of Hanging Shoes)*, *Cockroach Shepherd*, and *Lesser God (The God of Parking Lots)* (all 2015) are depictions of black men. In the light of recent events reflecting the persistence and violence of racial profiling in American cities, the works somehow implicate the viewer, and the resulting feeling is a dirty one.

Both exhibitions assume that we will one day arrive at a fucked-up world—or perhaps, that we're already there. Haffner's imagery of a bleak metropole provides snapshots of conspicuous inequities. Behar's future dystopia—in which digital entities persist, even thrive, beyond human extinction—by extension creates conditions in which viewers can witness a world they cannot inhabit, but in which the human hand remains discernible, through its own technological waste. "But without humans to program them, to direct their work and give them purpose, the devices persist in their empty routines," are the final sentences of Behar's video prologue. "As years go by, the Earth beneath them takes pity. The stony ground creeps toward the orphaned gadgets, embracing their fragile frames to soothe and brace them for their burden of infinite work" But, the earth that swaddles these gadgets is composed of mainly inorganic material—the soil itself has become a plastic replica of its failed self.

—Meredith Kooi



ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Katherine Behar, *3D-&&*, 2014 [photo: John H. Morrow; courtesy of the artist]; Matt Haffner, *Fallen God - Converse High*, 2015, cardboard [courtesy of Whitespace Gallery]