

# METRO PICTURES

Fateman, Johanna. "Camille Henrot, Metro Pictures," *Artforum* (January 2016).

## ARTFORUM



**Camille Henrot, *Killing Time*, 2015,**  
watercolor on paper, 76 3/8 × 59 3/8".

There were three distinct, amazing parts to Camille Henrot's Metro Pictures debut: huge watercolor paintings, 3-D-printed phones, and a motorized zoetrope. The watercolors were hung in the second room, on walls painted lemon yellow, a cheerful hue that set off both the bold pastel marks of her dashed-off vignettes and the dark absurdities of their subject matter. Henrot's paintings look like oversize *New Yorker* cartoons—they're spare like Liza Donnelly's drawings, and they nod to Saul Steinberg's wry regurgitation of the symbols and stylistic tics of modern masters—but Henrot is crasser. Themes of sexual abjection snake through the work, providing a counterweight to the painting-as-decor conceit suggested by the installation's vaguely institutional, Easter-in-Santa Fe palette. *Trickle-Down Effect* (all works 2015) shows various breeds of dogs in a coital conga line; in *Sad Dad*, a downcast man with a bird head and an erection drags a rag doll as he walks. Individual paintings are funny, but all together, they're funnier, maybe mostly because of the incongruity of their scale with the medium of watercolor on paper. Looking at them, I pictured a giant using an enormous paint set and a chip brush, an image suggested by *Killing Time* probably, which features a giant: He wears a suit and sits at a desk eating a person. Little legs, kicking, stick out of his mouth as he takes a call on pink phone.

Of course, instead, the businessman could be regular-size, and the person he's eating could be tiny. If that's the case, his pink phone would be the right size for us to use, like Henrot's sadistically interactive sculptures. These semifunctional telephonic devices were mounted on the walls of the gallery's first room. They're the props of bad dreams, with their nonsensical dial pads; awkward, Seussian receiver designs; and entrapping multiple-choice challenges. My favorite prompt was delivered by a recorded female voice on a small, flat-gray phone with a turquoise receiver and loosely curlicuing cord. Reciting the menu options of a surreal automated grievance-reporting line, it instructed, "For a complaint about yourself, press mute." Henrot has a knack for intuitively synthesizing found material, as in her lauded video piece *Grosse Fatigue*, 2013, for which she constructed an origin story of the universe via alternative and perhaps arbitrary, but resonant, visual taxonomies based on the collections of the Smithsonian Institute and Web-search results. Her phones, by contrast, are the product of less direct, more interpretative appropriations of culturally ubiquitous scripts—the jargon and structural conventions of crisis lines, diagnostic quizzes, self-help programs, and bureaucratic mazes—but they're similarly seductive in their ambition (real or feigned) to get at unconscious or universal knowledge. While titles such as *Dang Shaming* and *Is He Cheating* indicate specific themes, the sculptures are really direct lines to our shared internal clamor of self-recrimination and redemption seeking.

While the phones, like the paintings, refer to other, fantastical worlds, her zoetrope *October 2015 Horoscope* is truly transporting. The animation effect of the spinning wedding-cake form is achieved not with slits in a surrounding cylinder—that Victorian ingenuity—but with strobe lights in a darkened room. Cartoonish cigarettes worm around the base, bodybuilders lift weights, pills rain from prescription containers, and, at the very top, the moon waxes and wanes. There was something repellent to me about the old-timey Claymation-esque look to the piece—perplexing, given that I was enthralled by the technical feat of the illusion and the puzzle of its symbolic significance. The sculpture didn't tie the show together in any obvious or convenient way, but it's a pretty perfect emblem of Henrot's approach, the studied execution of seemingly whimsical, serious concerns.