



Every Night I Tell Myself I Am The Cosmos
Brandon Brown
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Sofia Cordova. *SIGLIOS*, 2014; pigment print on silk; 33 x 66 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Royal Nonesuch Gallery, Oakland.

A basic truth of human history is that there is no way to be certain what will survive (and thus signify) us. But being aware of this unpredictability doesn't necessarily change our feelings about the objects we produce, use, and ultimately leave behind. We continue to under- and overestimate their value and durability, and the fantasies we attach to them, in turn, powerfully influence how we act. To speak of the future then is to speak of the ineluctable pull of objects; the future is whatever inflects the present, administering our desires and behaviors. But the future always eludes us, demanding that we adapt our lives to the affects of hope and despair, while never offering security. It never appears as a clear thought, and in that sense the future is kind of like a dream.

Sofia Cordova's extraordinary exhibition *Every Night I Tell Myself I Am The Cosmos* creates an environment that recalls both the uncanny economy of the dream but also the randomness of any assortment of the "antiquities" that every historical present collects to decipher the past. *Every Night* establishes a tangible universe in which we are transported into the future, looking back at the relics from a post-anthropocene Earth. By meticulous selection and arrangement of her materials, Cordova fabricates a second present in the future tense (the past presented is our present), to share what sources the remaining humans on Earth will use to deduce our lives. Like every inevitable present looking backward, the objects that describe us fail to paint a full picture or provide a clear narrative even if what can be conjectured from them is no less

fascinating.

Cordova's show consists of four discrete pieces. *They Held Dances on the Graves of Those Who Died in The Terror 1,2,3,4,5,6+7* is a six-channel video, set to a sound piece by Matt Kirkland called *Fantasia*. *Fantasia* borrows from Mariah Carey and the Tom Tom Club, insinuating a lush soundtrack for the disturbing desolation of the future world the video projects.

Directly across the gallery is *Echoes of a Tumbling Throne (Odas Al Fin De Los Tiempos) #1*, a video ostensibly given as fragmentary narrative evidence of the world before and after the catastrophic event that brings about humanity's decline. *Echoes* cites the phantasmic simulacra of the video game. In each "level," various performers dance, pose, vamp, and sing—in front of trippy images of burbling water and leaves—to Cordova and Kirkland's carefully orchestrated, bilingual pop soundtrack. Objects in the background, like huge, slowly moving ships, meet their mirror images flipped upside down. In one exquisite moment, one of Cordova's characters repeats, "I'm not really here" while his image floats in front of fluffy white clouds. This oneiric atmosphere suggests that the practice of history itself operates closely to the weird logic of dreams; both are built on the productive errors inherent in listening to echoes for meaning and evaluating trace materials as significant data.

Two other large pieces, *The Kingdom Is Me* and *SIGLIOS*, line the other two walls of the gallery. *The Kingdom Is Me* is a large series of images almost entirely redacted by black paint, leaving only fragments (frequently, just a face) of their sources visible. Cordova's images include magazine photos of Michael Jackson, Willie Nelson, champagne and fruit, various taxidermied animals, and Based God Lil B, suggesting both the glory of our sublime spectacular culture and also its inevitable desiccation. The effect is a little like one of the sad bulletin boards that are constructed following a disaster, filled with faces and names on oddly cut pages, along with messages of hope and desperation haphazardly tacked up by somebody who hopes the arrangement will lead to something lost being found. Beyoncé's face (with the caption "No one has seen her"), peering out from an otherwise deleted context, is like the fragment of an ancient poem on papyrus, its predication necessarily speculative.

SIGLIOS, four large fabric pieces on which are printed stills from *Echoes*, has a devotional quality despite also being fun and glamorous. In the print on the far right, an avatar character appears over a layer of clouds. A vibrant red scarf contrasts with the bright blue visor she wears upside down on her head. It is impossible to determine definitively what time period she represents: a fractured, techno-inundated present? A signifier for future humans of a posterior history? The vertigo of this character's origin is somewhat alleviated by the message on her visor, a message of our antiquity, and one that speaks to dreamers in all tenses and times: "CARPE DIEM."

While pop is an obviously rich source for this work, Cordova does not simply celebrate pop culture as an eternal balm against the inevitable dystopia we careen toward; pop is at the very least complicit with the imagined disaster to come, if not implicated in it outright. These works in *Every Night* are decidedly mixed in their feelings. By virtue of being set in the future, present anxieties are resituated as both laments for a shattered world and accusations—we could have done otherwise. If Cordova's art asks us to acknowledge that our daydreams of glamor, luxury, stardom, and the easy ways in which we embody them in our own small lives are partly accountable for our present course, it also asks us to heed the lessons of less conscious

fantasies.

The show's title—itsself derived from a pop song, Chris Bell's "I Am the Cosmos"—substantiates the song sung by the nomadic griot who narrates *Echoes of a Tumbling Throne*. Its message: As for our world, it was all a dream, perhaps, but a dream in which human beings occupied a fraught present. To say to oneself, "I am the cosmos" is, after all, as unifying a gesture as it is destabilizing when living in a world that systematically capitalizes on mutable identity. The "cosmopolitanism" Cordova's work embodies is a mode of life that refuses the arbitrary regulations of dominion, despite the circumscription of that refusal. Still, *Every Night* is full of brilliant particulars that root the past (our present) to that subjunctive desolation of our now: dying waters, ratchet anthems, and spectacular melodies. It is a condition to be lamented, but also admired, even revered.