

At City Limits, Sofía Córdova Imagines Life After Humanity
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Sofía Córdova, 'They Held Dances on the Graves of Those Who Died In The Terror 22 (Seoul Cherry1), 23 (Seoul Cherry2), 26 (Blue Whale);' 2017. (Courtesy the artist and City Limits Gallery; Photo by Graham Holoch)

Scientists who wish to highlight the incredible -- and largely destructive -- impact humans have had on the planet have proposed the term "Anthropocene" for a new geological epoch. This term has been gaining popularity, but epochs come and go, and if humans have brought about the end of the Holocene so quickly, can we be trusted with our own?

The answer is, of course, "no," and Sofía Córdova's *The Gentle Voice That Talks To You Won't Talk Forever* at Oakland's City Limits Gallery is a look at what might follow the Anthropocene. The outlook isn't all that bad, but you might have to be non-human to fully appreciate it.

Córdova speculates about a fictitious-yet-likely future in which nature has survived humanity, and though the exhibition doesn't make the extinction of our young species explicit, it seems like a strong possibility. A three-channel 8mm and digital video lends an air of horror to the exhibition. Two of the flickering black and purple channels record cherry trees in a Seoul park devoid of human figures. Buildings and monuments are sometimes seen through the trees, but the deserted park is eerie. It's a ghost town in the center of a metropolis. The third channel features the decomposing carcass of a blue whale on a Bolinas beach. Though these scenes are forbidding, they initially clash with the rest of the exhibition.

Looking on from the center of the gallery is a pink taxidermied dove perched on a pink rock. The dove rests on a classical column and seems to be holding court. None of the terror and bleakness of the video is present. In fact, whatever changes in the world the video documents seems to have allowed for the dove to reign -- for peace to reign. This realization negates

the horror in the video; it simply documents a peaceful landscape and the natural process of decay. It's only from the human perspective that something is wrong; the trees and the birds are fine.

An inspiration for this exhibition is Miharu Takizakura, a 1,000-year-old cherry tree in Fukushima Prefecture, Japan. The tree survived the region's 2011 earthquake and nuclear disaster and has become a symbol of resilience. Córdova borrows the pale pink of cherry blossoms for nearly everything in the exhibition, including the overhead lights. This vaguely suggests radioactivity but also playfulness or joy, like a post-apocalyptic Instagram-friendly environment in search of participants.

The exhibition is presented as an installation, with an ambient soundtrack by Córdova and Matthew Gonzalez Kirkland, shells and artificial coral (all pink, of course), reflective surfaces, a video projection, and hand-painted signs.

Many of the works, and especially their titles, refer ambiguously to events and entities, such as "the Psychic Wars" and "the Terror." One 13-foot-long sign reads "nos comió los dulces" (translated as "she/they ate our candy"); another work is titled *All That She Wants*. It is not clear what the history of this future is, or whose sentience is acknowledged in the works. Maybe it's a sign that human life has survived somewhere, or maybe it merely represents a shift in the kinds of life afforded personhood and pronouns.

The Gentle Voice reads as both a warning and a taunt: The Earth doesn't need us. But the warning is what's most urgent. Human-centered thinking should prioritize the preservation of our species and the environments in which we live. But if shortsightedness and instant gratification are central to the human experience, they shape our thinking about the world -- hence our current predicaments of potential nuclear war, climate change, drought, deforestation, garbage islands, and artificial earthquakes. Paradoxically, our survival might rely upon our ability to imagine a world without humans and to imagine priorities beyond our own, since ours have proven to be so self-destructive.



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