

ArtReview

Rochelle Goldberg *The Cannibal Actif*

Vava, Milan 5 June – 4 July

Chartreuse green and anthracite black: Rochelle Goldberg's installation *The Cannibal Actif* (all works 2015) turns Vava's ground floor into a contrast-rich landscape. A miniature forest of verdant chia sprouts colonises three areas of grey carpet, as if eating it up, while a composty smell pervades the space, surrounding a series of dark glazed ceramic sculptures. Shaped like coiled serpents – some lifelike, some amorphous, some oddly pressed into the rectangular shape of a briefcase, like the negative space of deluxe snakeskin luggage – they glow seductively under the spotlights. On the silvery surface of her sculptures, Goldberg has impressed the uneven patterns of scalelike marks, so that the line between organic and inorganic, natural and synthetic becomes ever more difficult to draw. These petrified reptiles remind me of a morning from my childhood: trying to plant tulip bulbs in a corner of the lawn, I found a family of hibernating lizards. Their perfectly rolled up, cold and dry bodies looked uncannily dead and alive.

Other creatures inhabit this exhibition space: the floor and columns are bisected by the glossy slime trails of live snails, covered in glitter, 'like turtles that will soon collapse under the weight of their jewel-encrusted shells', Goldberg writes in the elliptical accompanying text, 'Notes on the Cannibal Actif'. It's an overt reference to Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *À Rebours* (*Against Nature*, 1884), a now-almost-clichéd monument to decadence and the toxic beauty of artifice,

whose protagonist Des Esseintes improves upon the vividness of an Oriental rug by placing on it 'a striking object': first he has his tortoise's shell glazed with gold, then 'incrusted with rare stones', the weight of which kills the animal, 'unable to support the dazzling luxury imposed on it, the rutilant cope with which it had been covered'. In the gallery's basement, Goldberg has installed another set of sculptures in black glazed ceramic, *Hungry Hungry #1, #2, #3, #4, #5*, in the shape of crocodile heads with open jaws, held aloft by wiry steel frameworks: another work evidently ingesting a historical source, this time Lucio Fontana's glazed ceramic *Cocodrillo* (*Crocodile*) (1936–7). These predators at the top of the food chain – as well as of the fetishism of the luxury industry; given their precious skins – seem afloat in an invisible pond, waiting patiently for some (dead or alive) food to fall from the ceiling.

An active cannibal hunts and kills others of its kind, before eating them; a passive one only feeds on corpses. Michel de Montaigne introduced the distinction in his essay 'Of Cannibals' (1580), on the Brazilian Tupinambá people, while Oswald de Andrade, in his celebrated *Manifesto Antropófago* (1928), turned into a positive paradigm the primitives' vital capacity to absorb and process the 'other'. Now that the doom-struck scenario of the Anthropocene is here to stay, it is pretty clear how voracious and actively lethal our current

cycle of consumption can be, both at planetary and individual level. With her installations, Goldberg appears to stage allegories of our enhanced rhythms of growth, decay and forced revitalisation. Chia is marketed as a miraculous 'superfood', an ideal combination of nutrients, antioxidants, Omega-3, vitamins and minerals that provides prolonged hydration to the body, so that it can sustain prolonged fatigue. If we're tired, it's perhaps because, besides daily labour, we also have to withstand the increasingly heavy encrustation of our fabricated online personas. 'Devouring forces eventually run dry in a circuit of dissolve,' remarks the artist.

After writing her 'Notes', Goldberg relatedly invited the artist Eric Schmid to 'add his own voice to it', resulting in three pages of freewheeling scribbled notes, keywords and comments, in the form of a Google Docs poem. For instance, Goldberg's 'Where could anyone locate the threshold of becoming animal?' is followed by Schmid's 'Desire, fucking, shitting, eating'. One finds references to the uncertainty principle, Henri Poincaré, hallucinations, love, Antonin Artaud, Friedrich Hölderlin, tectonic plates, dis-identification, etc in an open stream(ing) of consciousness. Here, the materials to consume, churn, digest, turn into fertiliser, sow and then swallow, over and over again, are processed language and meta-information. No live prey, apparently.

Barbara Casavecchia

