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I Am A Monster
Elija Montgomery
August 1- 29, 2014

What is a Wat

Elija Montgomery's project I AM A MONSTER is an installation of his monster-creature, Wat, depicted in his natural habitat, an environment Montgomery has built into the gallery's window display. Unlike most monsters, he does not live in a dampened cave or a haunted forest, he lives in a place we will find very familiar: a bedroom. Wat, a creature of green faux-fur, acrylic and foam, lives in a room intended to look as if it has been decorated by his own hand. The room may contain such personal touches as an actual laundry basket, a bookshelf filled with monster related reference books and an accent wall painted with Wat's favourite colour. Because he is a messy monster, the t-shirts Montgomery creates for him to wear (they zip at the back due to the size of Wat's head) tend to be strewn around the room.

Montgomery takes great care to create a realistic home for Wat within the gallery space, one that is believable enough to almost go ignored. His details are strategic, Montgomery intersperses photos of Wat around the room in a natural way as if they're the monster's personal mementos rather than another part of the project itself.

I imagine Wat was built from the inside out, bone to skin; a careful assemblage of animal and human parts, informed by a study of comparative anatomies. Like most monsters, Wat was most likely created in the dead of some stormy night because Montgomery seems to work around the clock.

Wat is a creature that defies categorization in almost every sense. In appearance he resembles a mascot, but unlike most mascots generally created to personify a specific characteristic or trait, what qualities he is meant to embody are unclear. Wat's physical characteristics are a contradictory mix of predator and prey: a fox's ears, large, rabbit-like feet, an owl's eyes and a canary's beak; his pelt is part fur, part feather and his arms haven't decided yet whether they end in fingers or wings. There are many parts of Wat designed to evoke a resemblance to something not quite real but he also possesses some individualistic and intentional details – lines on his palms, a careful differentiation of fur colour - that position him as something very specific, something you could find in an encyclopedia.

Despite the time and care that has gone into Wat's creation, Wat himself is not the point of Montgomery's project; Wat is a catalyst to what Montgomery describes as “an invitation to see and imagine each other; an invitation to interpret¹”. Wat, being neither this nor that, is a metaphor for the complexities of human identity. Whether we see him as a monster or a misfit, as a friendly creature or a lonely one, the relationship we have with him defines who Wat is and, by extension, what the project is about.

One of the reasons we find puppets (and puppet-like creatures) so compelling lies in how easily they transcend physical and emotional boundaries; they have the ability, as one puppeteer suggests, to “quickly mainline into our subconscious.”² They're useful, for example, in some therapies because of how eagerly we project ourselves onto them. Montgomery's photos present Wat's life as a series of open ended situations that we're encouraged to interpret as we see fit and they can mean many different things to many different people: they can become stories about gender or sexuality, feeling lonely or fitting in. Like a puppet, Wat is also able to play with our emotions in ways human actors are incapable of; for instance, when I see a photo of Wat empty and crumpled he feels deader than any human actor portraying death ever could because I know that technically the actor is still breathing while Wat has literally become an empty, lifeless shell.³

Wat's strength, and what makes him so interesting as a project, is his ability wear a multitude of identities at the same time: those of the artist, the viewer and the person giving Wat life, the suit's wearer. When one of Montgomery's friends was able to recognize one of the suit's wearers, Sean, in costume as Wat “doing an Elija,”⁴ they were perceiving several layers of Wat's identity at once: not only Sean's identity as himself in costume and Wat as Montgomery's creation but Wat's personality as it was being synthesized through Sean's performance and Wat as a creature with a wholly separate personality, capable of convincing mimicry.

Montgomery's own relationship with Wat is a complex and ongoing negotiation. He is aware that Wat is a facet of his own personality and at the same time Wat is a creature with a life of his own - he has a pet, an instagram account and even an OKCupid profile; he reads comics and hibernates over the winter. Photo shoots show Wat both with Montgomery, in carefully constructed environments, and on his own, interacting with the real world in parks and coffee shops. The most tantalizing mystery surrounding Wat is the tangly and unanswerable question of how much of Wat is Montgomery and how much of Montgomery is Wat.

-Alexander Barattin

¹ Barattin, Alexander. Personal interview. 16 July 2014.

² West, L. Zeb. Interview by n.p. *Q & A w/ Puppeteer Zeb L. West*. Brief Encounters, 2013. Web. 24 July 2014.

³ Byrne, Bryony. "A Return to Childhood." *Aesthetica*. Aesthetica, the Art and Culture Mag. 1 Feb. 2012. Web. 20 July 2014.

⁴ Barattin, Alexander. Personal interview. 16 July 2014.