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## Reviews


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### London Fieldworks

Beaconsfield, London, UK

Cameron Irving

The first of the good weather, and I'm under a chilly railway arch in south London, viewing a projection depicting a scene of post-industrial dystopia. In darkness that makes it difficult even to make out anyone else who may be in the room, it quickly becomes apparent that I'm not in for something reflecting the jovialities of springtime.

Led by Bruce Gilchrist and Jo Joelson, London Fieldworks is a multidisciplinary initiative operating at the interface of art, science and technology. Their previous projects, often produced in collaboration with other artists, have probed into the relationship of human consciousness to natural and elemental rhythms. *Hibernator: prince of the petrified forest* (2007) expands on scientific research into the behaviour of hibernating animals (such as experiments involving the artificial induction of suspended animation in rodents), assimilating the material through a wider cultural lens.

It is Felix Salten's *Bambi: A Life in the Woods* (1923) – the source for Walt Disney's eponymous animation – that provided the inspiration for *Hibernator...*, and, in turn, directed critical attention towards the legacy of Disney. By exhuming the myth that Uncle Walt himself was cryogenically frozen at the point of death, the project leaps into the scientifically dubious world of cryogenics and reincarnates him as an imagined evil alter ego called Hexer. Working with technology originally pioneered in the animation studios of Disney, the alter ego takes physical form as a functioning animatronic, whose movements and facial expressions are dictated by a sensor responding to the nuances of daylight.

Hexer was to be found in the upper gallery perched, in all his prosthetic glory, on a synthetic green podium. Modelled on the facial characteristics of Disney, the moustachioed visage extends from a mutant frame based on the bodies of Thumper and Bambi. His facial expressions were slight but unnerving, and a grin that was accordingly 'evil' and smug at the same time remained fixed on my visit, and movement was confined to a pair of eyes that would suddenly open and stare – indifferent to my presence.

Functioning as a working studio, the set-up in this space took on the look of a film studio. With Hollywood-style animatronics in mind, I could not help but be reminded of the prosthetic cabbie in the science fiction flick *Total Recall* (1990) – a substitute human interface that emits (apparent random) niceties while carrying passengers on routes predetermined by computer programmes. A camera trained at Hexer recorded his movements, and the live footage was relayed downstairs into the café/reading area onto a plasma screen, acting as a digital interface that blurred the two worlds of the actual and the virtual.

The centrepiece of the show consisted of the video collage prince of the petrified forest. It was compiled throughout the duration of the show in eight short episodes installed on a weekly basis and only reached completion in the last week of the exhibition. These episodes – or 'visions' as the artists called them – were made with the help of collaborators based in New Zealand, who integrated computer-generated imagery with video footage of Hexer in situ, sending the resultant material to Gilchrist and Joelson via digital communication programmes such as Skype.

In the film we see Hexer in an apocalyptic, computer-generated environment – antithetical to the sentimental idyll of Disney's animations. The menacing tones of a narrator guide us through the wasteland, uprooting uncomfortable details of corruption and megalomania hiding behind the innocent façade of family entertainment. Milking the artistic licence that an imaginary alter ego might offer, the film crosses into the choppy waters of historical and biographical fact. With accusations against people who actually existed, we hear Salvador Dalí, 'the Catalan clown', charged with 'a Führer fascination', and the inclusion of a toy train that passes by on-screen gains a sinister significance. Read as an allusion to the trains that took victims to the Nazi's concentration camps, it doesn't take much to decode it as a crude reference to Disney's alleged anti-Semitism.

With a good deal of peripheral information needed for the project to make sense, at times it fell suffered from a syndrome common to many multimedia-based projects, in which a proliferation of media can distract from artistic intent as much as draw you to it. To the film's detriment, the eerie physical presence of Hexer fell flat among the animated imagery and emphatic voice-over.

'Did you think you could live for ever? Did you think you could fake your own death?' asks the narrator suspiciously, implying that the ultimate dream of the megalomaniac is to cheat death and claim immortality. In a way Hexer does just that. His robotic body, animated by the changes of daylight, functions as a sort of life-support machine that brings him out of hibernation whenever he is required to perform. But more significantly, if there were any legislative difficulties resulting from the Hexer/Disney chimera, ideas about hibernation and reincarnation might take on greater social connotations, if influence was wrought from beyond the grave.

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