

62 Self- Abstractions Juan Antonio Olivares', 3-D animation *Moléculas*, 2017

By Stephanie Seidel



Id Merch, 2015. 3D photographic print, rapid prototyped plastic, aluminum, faux fur, paint. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.



Moléculas, video still, 2017. HD video. 10 min. Courtesy of the artist.



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A ten-minute 3-D animation shows a teddy bear in a psychoanalyst's office recalling early and sometimes traumatic memories. In voiceover the bear recounts the day of his mother's passing. As the protagonist delves deeper into the memory, the visuals become increasingly abstract, showing a flooding bathroom and eventually outer space. The work, titled *Moléculas*, premiered in January 2017 at Off Vendome, New York, and is featured in a solo exhibition by Olivares (b. 1988, lives in New York) currently on view at the

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. *Moléculas* is the artist's first animated work.

Stephanie Seidel: You made the entire animation from scratch. The starting point for *Moléculas* was a conversation you had with your father, in which he recalled memories of his mother. What was the reason for bringing this together with an animated teddy bear?

Juan A. Olivares: It happened somewhat unexpectedly. I was working on a model of the teddy bear and I was originally writing a script that it was supposed to perform. A few months into the process of this, I saw my father and we started talking about a kind of global anxiety I was sensing. I valued his perspective, as he has seen the world go through such drastic changes – he was my age in the 1970s, which seems like an incredibly tumultuous time in comparison to now. The conversation started progressing to a place I didn't expect, and acting on impulse, I asked him if he'd mind if I recorded him. A few weeks later, while I was working on the fur of the teddy bear, it hit me that the conversation could be the voice of the teddy bear.

The history of animation offers many examples of characters with human behavior and emotions. How do you see your piece in relation to this tradition?

One of the experiences that sparked my interest in working with these animated characters was seeing the movie *Up* (2009). The first ten minutes of the film are a kind of introductory movie-within-the-movie, and I found myself a sobbing mess within those first minutes. The question I couldn't answer by the end was, "How was it that within just a few minutes of plot development I was so moved by the loss of one of those characters? What does it say about an audience coming to these movies so ready for an emotional release?" I wanted to explore this aspect of animation and how we project ourselves onto these fictional characters so easily. It's a very curious and absurdist aspect of our humanity.

The bear motif made an appearance in one of your previous works, *Id Merch* (2015), a 3-D printed, modified portrait of yourself. Here, one

arm was replaced with a teddy bear arm and one leg with a futuristic robot prosthesis.

The piece came from the idea of body modification. At one point in the future our bodies will become so highly customizable you might actually be able to do these changes. This work might have been the first step toward thinking about the bear that you see in *Moléculas*, just in terms of imagining your body in a totally different one. There is a slightly fetishistic and yet ordinary side to wanting to become these fictional characters that intrigues me.

The teddy bear is associated with care and comfort, a surrogate companion, something to hold onto. There are a number of stories of lost and neglected bears mirroring childhood and family trauma. What was your specific interest in this figure?

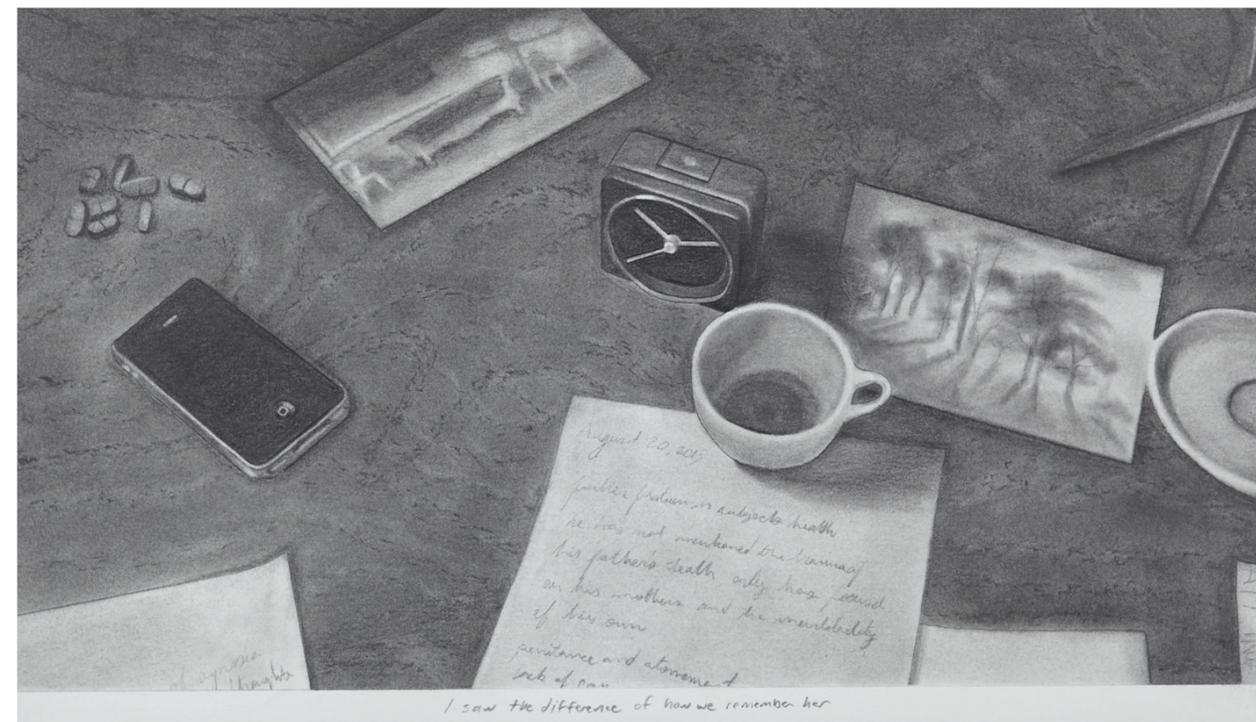
Images tend to appear in my mind, and they sometimes won't immediately make sense to me, so I chase them. The teddy bear chose me.

In relation to the speaker's voice, the bear is a radical abstraction; however, at the same time it's a point of identification.

I try to reach a place where images make sense at a visceral level but are not extremely literal as a reference. What interested me about the teddy bear was that it is an almost universal symbol of empathy. Seeing the bear ventriloquizing the text felt strange and didn't totally make sense to me. It actually made me uncomfortable to a certain degree. That was why I felt I had to chase it a bit more, follow it further and see what would happen. Then it really started getting a life of its own.

There is an uncanny effect to this human voice inhabiting the figure of the bear. Especially since this bear seems to be in a dark spot himself, showing signs of "wear and tear" up to the point of its complete dissolution in the last scene. Prior to this, we see the bear in a psychoanalyst's office, which provides the framework for this "journey" into memories. Can you talk a bit more about the psychoanalytical references in the work?

The room and the LC4 chaise are definitely a strong allusion to a psychoanalytic setting. I was thinking about the position of the viewer in this video, their proximity to the subject. In the narrator's stream of



Untitled, 2016-17. Graphite on paper. Courtesy of the artist.



Moléculas, 2017. HD video. 10 min. Installation view at Off Vendome, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Off Vendome, New York.

consciousness the viewer is getting one person's account. The viewer shares the perspective of the analyst. However, at one point the camera enters the body of the bear and you assume the perspective of the bear. This reminds me of the stage where the analyst becomes so close to the patient that they almost become part of the subject itself. It's about reaching a point of empathy and having compassion for another person.

The fluidity of dreams, the subconscious that psychoanalysis dives into seems to be mirrored in the unlimited visual potential that animation provides. The second half of the work makes extensive use of these possibilities. Extending beyond the analyst's office we dive into one of the photos on the desk. A bathroom floods simultaneously with the overwhelming pain of the narrator. We pass arctic landscapes and eventually zoom out into outer space. The last words we hear, before they are swallowed by dramatic music, suggest that death may be "a type of change, another type of life that might continue as molecules... atoms." I think the piece is successful in the way it uses tools of abstraction to look at these memories on a metalevel – an abstracted experience that people can relate to. Can you talk more about these abstractions?

It's interesting for me that you find these decisions to be abstractions, because it's making me think of the word differently. For previous videos, I would plan shots and try to realize them as concepts tied to writing, allowing the visuals to evolve and transform naturally. With animation, however, the link to planning is much tighter as no shots are ever "captured" by accident. The shot of the messy desktop is actually the result of hours of careful placement of objects and textures so as to appear haphazard. The way I would work more impulsively was to let my mind wander: suddenly I would imagine a light bulb shattering, and figuring out how to simulate that would excite me. There's a pleasure in simulating the real world through these programs' algorithms, and I tried to share that with the viewer.

The reflection of personal experience in a theatrical or rather cinematic way brings to mind an earlier work of yours, *Kokomo Lost* (2016). Is there a connection between these works?

Kokomo Lost does feel like a first step toward *Molécules*. This work came from

a feeling of being trapped in New York. At that time, I started watching the show *LOST*. It's about the survivors of a plane crash stranded on a mystical tropical island. I loved the idea of escaping into a different world involuntarily. In *Molécules*, the step I took was thinking about how the viewer could be transported to a different world. The narration is an introspection into one's memory, which can be its own type of escape.

This idea of displacement in both works has taken on an unforeseen urgency due to recent political developments.

This political layer was very unexpected and not my intention when I was making the video. While the work was on display at Off Vendome the immigration ban was announced, and I suddenly realized there was a political implication of the work that I could not have imagined while making the work in Germany. The idea of origin and entitlement was being invoked by Trump and his campaign: he encouraged his base to feel disenfranchised and in response they began to make claims to the "authenticity" of this land, which is a flagrant misconception of the history of the Americas. However, for me this is definitely not a work illustrating a political topic – it's not a piece about displacement or immigration. It's just one of the many possible references the work can take on and absorb over time. In my opinion, this work conveys a more universal idea of displacement.

The family issue recalled in the video – the mother passing while the narrator is in another country and can't attend the funeral – is a tragic manifestation of this "not being home" and is indeed universal as it relates to any person who does not live close to their family.

Exactly.

So, you could say what connects all three works that we have talked about is a question of identity. In your work you address this rather large question by shifting it into multiple realms, starting from altering your own body, to dissecting a voice from a narrator, and lastly projecting human memories onto an inanimate character.

I think identity has become its own type of cliché. The internet and social media platforms have fostered different ways of expressing and exposing yourself, which is changing our idea of "identity" and how we construct it. There's this

incredible Rimbaud quote: "*Je est un autre*" (I is another). What interests me is the discrepancy between the perception of a person from outside-in and from the inside-out. You will never fully know the internal workings of another person, but also you can't completely understand how you appear to the outside world.

Molécules's narration is located between this "self" and a third person. Using the third person actually seems to make the narration more approachable from a place of abstraction. Alternately, *Id Merch* is an almost self-deprecating version of a "portrait of the artist" that, through self-distancing, opens a space for the viewer to come in.

Totally. Vulnerability is something these three works have in common and that I want to continue to explore. I want to keep dissecting myself and very personal experiences in one way or the other. Someone might interpret this as egocentric or a type of self-obsession, but I feel in a way it has nothing to do with me. I'm using myself to understand a more abstract sense of self.

Stephanie Seidel is Associate Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami.

Juan Antonio Olivares: *Molécules* will be open until June 10, 2018, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



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