



**LEEDS
ARTS** RESEARCH
CENTRE

PROGRESSIVE ROCKS

NATHANIEL MELLORS

OUTPUT INFORMATION

Title:
Progressive Rocks

Output Type:
M – Exhibition

Venue:
The New Museum, New York, USA

Year of first exhibition:
2018

Month of first exhibition:
February

Research Groups:
Curating



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION STATEMENT

Using the Upper Paleolithic period as a lens onto the present, many of the works in 'Progressive Rocks' feature the Neanderthal, a species of early human previously thought inferior to Homo sapiens. Apparently incapable of making art – a marker of human intelligence – the Neanderthal nevertheless here functions as an artistic savant, raising questions about how we 'recognise' art, what the framework is for its deployment.

The methods vary widely, four films appearing alongside sculptures and paintings. In the film 'The Sophisticated Neanderthal Interview' (2014), an interview between a contemporary man and a Neanderthal artist culminates with the Neanderthal taking control, the power dynamic between the two shifting as he reveals his own primitive 'practice'. 'The Neanderthal Container' (2014) also flattens linear time, depicting a Neanderthal in perpetual free-fall over California's San Joaquin Valley, trapped in an eternal feedback loop.

Progressive Rocks is Mellors' first solo presentation in a New York museum. The New Museum produced a fold-out publication and guide, free to visitors. The exhibition, seen by over half a million, was broadly reviewed online and in 'The Village Voice'.

The significance of 'Progressive Rocks' lies in its status as a mid-career retrospective showing the range of Mellors' work, from the fantastical comic videos to the sculptures they engender, the animatronic heads and installations, consolidating his practice as one that moves between disciplines with intellectual purpose rather than purely formal gregariousness. The works speak to each other, sometimes literally in the case of the animatronic heads. As William Corwin writes, 'Mellors's dramatic interactions follow a Socratic model—a naïf is schooled on reality [by a] wiser foil' in a critique of morality, religion and power. Cinematic tropes are combined with methods from TV sitcom, theatre, science fiction and anthropology, showcasing his versatility as script-writer, director, editor and producer.

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“ Progressive Rocks revels in its all-over-the-map messiness, but there is a wonderful and cogent dialogue between the video and animatronic objects. ... There is a wonderful, arcane animatronic piece in the La Brea Tar Pits Museum displaying an extinct saber-tooth tiger attacking a similarly extinct sloth. Something about the dull, plodding, repetitive inevitability of the tiger finishing off his prey speaks to Mellors’s message in both his kinetic pieces and videos. Animatronic displays are a futile attempt at re-creating reality; they inevitably just make things seem weirder. Mellors uses this surreal space and runs with it, producing moving objects whose animatronic claim on reality is at complete odds to their subject matter... ”

William Corwin, *The Brooklyn Rail*

“ The fantastical and the sardonically cynical
come together in videos and audio-animatronic
tableaux by this British artist, who divides his
time between L.A. and Amsterdam. Mellors
plumbs the foibles and divine lunacy of that
fragile state known as the human condition. ”



Installation shot of 'Progressive Rocks' by Nathaniel Mellors at the New Museum, New York, 6 Feb 2018 – 15 Apr 2018.

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Installation shot of 'Progressive Rocks' by Nathaniel Mellors at the New Museum, New York, 6 Feb 2018 – 15 Apr 2018.



APPENDIX

REVIEWS & ARTICLES

Art Viewer, 'Nathaniel Mellors at New Museum', Art Viewer, April 2018, <https://artviewer.org/nathaniel-mellors-at-new-museum/>

Rachel Cole, 'On pushing in different directions', The Creative Independent, April 2018, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/nathaniel-mellors-on-pushing-in-different-directions/>

William Corwin, 'Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks', The Brooklyn Rail, March 2018, <https://brooklynrail.org/2018/03/artseen/Nathaniel-Mellors-Progressive-Rocks>

Pac Pobric, 'At the The New Museum, Nathaniel Mellors Strains for Laughs', Village Voice, 16 February 2018 <https://www.villagevoice.com/2018/02/16/at-the-new-museum-nathaniel-mellors-strains-for-laughs/>

Note: in this piece, the work Ourhouse Episode -1: Time is incorrectly listed as 'Ourhouse – Episode 1', when in fact Ourhouse Episode -1: Time is the prequel to the existing episodes of Ourhouse, as the '-1' indicates.

TIME OUT, 'TO DO: The best art exhibits in your area', TIME OUT New York, February 7-13 2018.

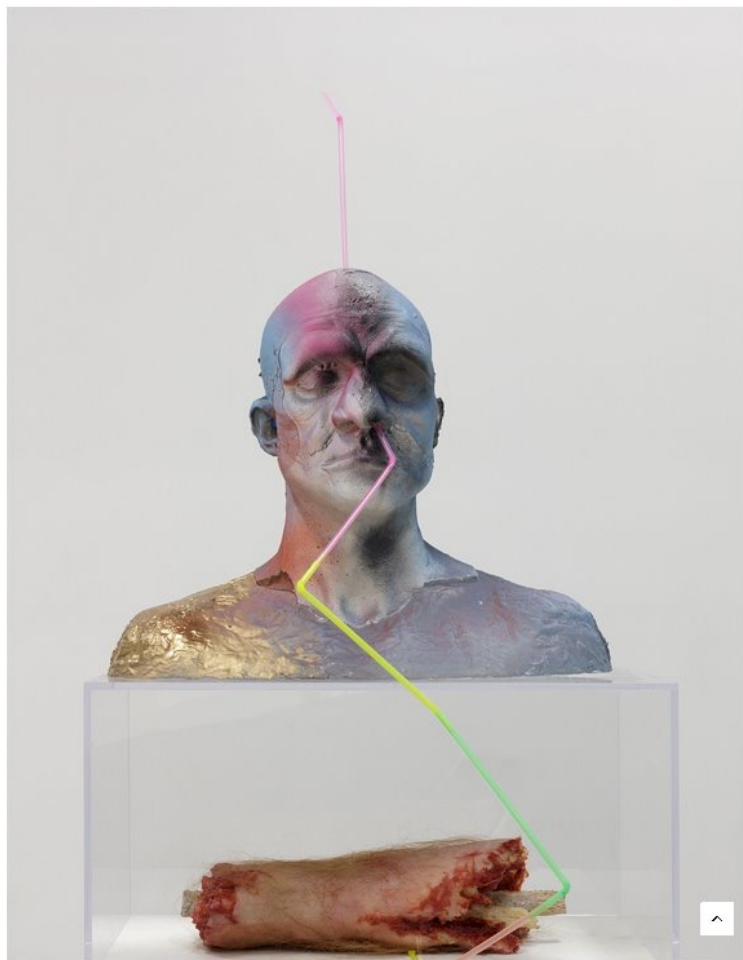
PRESS RELEASES

New Museum, 'Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks', <https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/nathaniel-mellors-progressive-rocks>

Art Viewer

Nathaniel Mellors at New Museum

April 4, 2018


<https://artviewer.org/nathaniel-mellors-at-new-museum/>

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Artist: Nathaniel Mellors

Exhibition title: Progressive Rocks

Curated by: Margot Norton

Venue: New Museum, New York, US

Date: February 6 – April 15, 2018

Photography: all images copyright and courtesy of the artist and New Museum, New York

The fantastical and wryly comical videos, animatronic sculptures, and installations by Los Angeles- and Amsterdam-based artist Nathaniel Mellors (b. 1974, Doncaster, UK) employ absurdist satire to incisively critique morality, national identity, religion, and power structures in contemporary society. Conflating cinematic tropes and methods from television sitcoms, theater, science fiction, mythology, and anthropology, Mellors writes the scripts for each of his projects, which he also directs, edits, and produces. "Progressive Rocks," Mellors's first solo presentation in New York, includes four films alongside related paintings and sculptures, all of which feature recurring characters and story lines that intertwine and unfold throughout the exhibition.

Using the Upper Paleolithic period as a lens through which to view the present, Mellors's recent works typically feature the Neanderthal, a species of early human that was until recently considered inferior to "modern" *Homo sapiens*—and incapable of making art, a marker of human intelligence. *The Sophisticated Neanderthal Interview* (2014) focuses on an interview between a naive contemporary man and a Neanderthal artist. As the interview progresses, the power dynamic between the two shifts as it becomes clear that, despite his presumed primitivism, the Neanderthal is in control. *Neanderthal Container* (2014) similarly flattens linear time, featuring a Neanderthal figure in perpetual free-fall over California's San Joaquin Valley, trapped in an eternal feedback loop.

Ourhouse Episode -1: Time (2015–16), the latest in Mellors's dramatic sci-fi series *Ourhouse* (2010–ongoing), is projected alongside an animatronic sculpture of The Object, a book-eating creature who literally digests a family's library and controls what they see and experience. In the film, The Object consumes *The Eternal Present*, a book covering 35,000 years of European cave art, as the family travels across time to ultimately find themselves in a permanent present, dislocated from history. A new animatronic sculpture and multichannel video installation of *The Aalto Natives* (2017, in collaboration with Erkkä Nissinen), originally conceived for the Finnish Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, is in the center of the exhibition. In this work, two messianic beings—in the form of a cardboard box and a giant egg—attempt to make sense of a culture they created a million years prior, which suffers from xenophobia and polarizing populism. The title of the exhibition, like many of Mellors's projects, plays with linguistic elasticity, conjuring multiple meanings that range from a music subgenre to a forward-thinking mineral mass to a crisis in liberal culture. His raucous works stage a breakdown of form, in which free associations, puns, and fragmented dialogue abstract meaning, causing narrative structures to collapse and a sense of the surreal to take hold.

<https://artviewer.org/nathaniel-mellors-at-new-museum/>

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"Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks" 2018. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

<https://artviewer.org/nathaniel-mellors-at-new-museum/>

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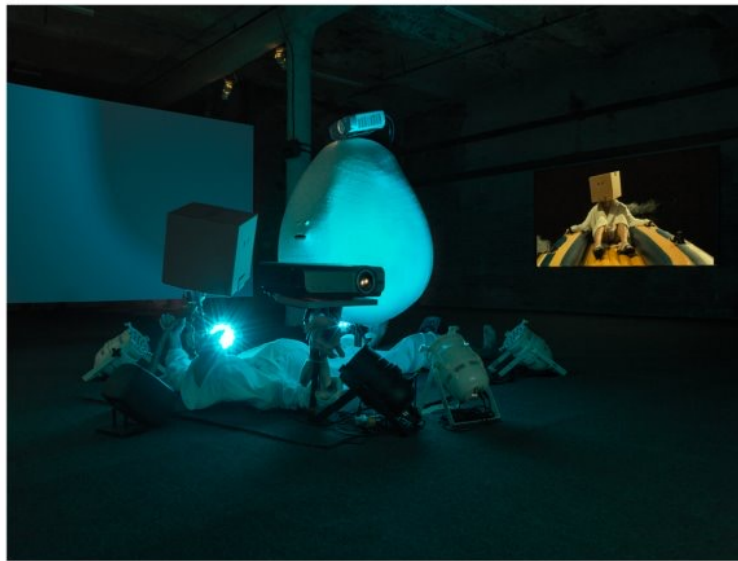
Nathaniel Mellors at New Museum – Art Viewer



"Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks" 2018. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

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Nathaniel Mellors at New Museum – Art Viewer



"Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks" 2018. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio



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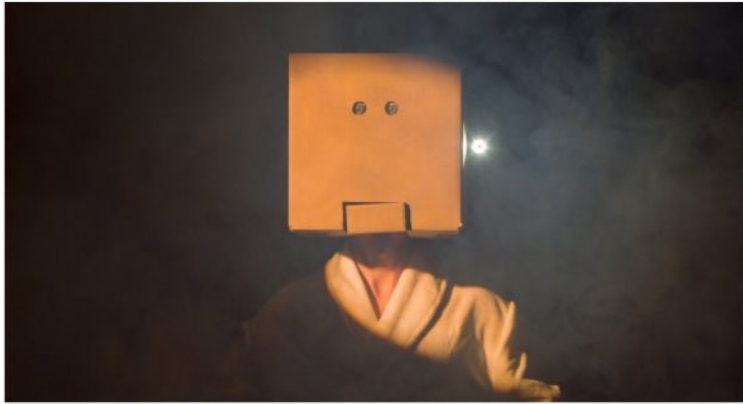
Nathaniel Mellors at New Museum – Art Viewer



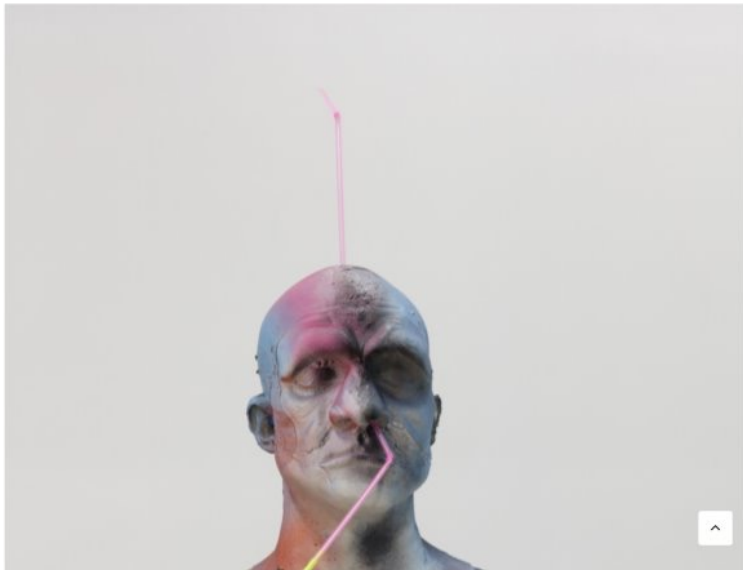
"Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks" 2018. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

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Nathaniel Mellors at New Museum – Art Viewer



Nathaniel Mellors and Erkkä Nissinen, *The Aalto Natives (Floored Version)*, 2017–18, Animatronic sculpture: steel, wood, and silicone, Three-channel HD video, sound, color; 53:34 min, *The Aalto Natives* was originally commissioned by Frame Finland for the 2017 Venice Biennale with the generous support of The Mondriaan Fund and the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam, Courtesy the artist; the Box, Los Angeles; Matt's Gallery, London; Monitor, Rome; and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam

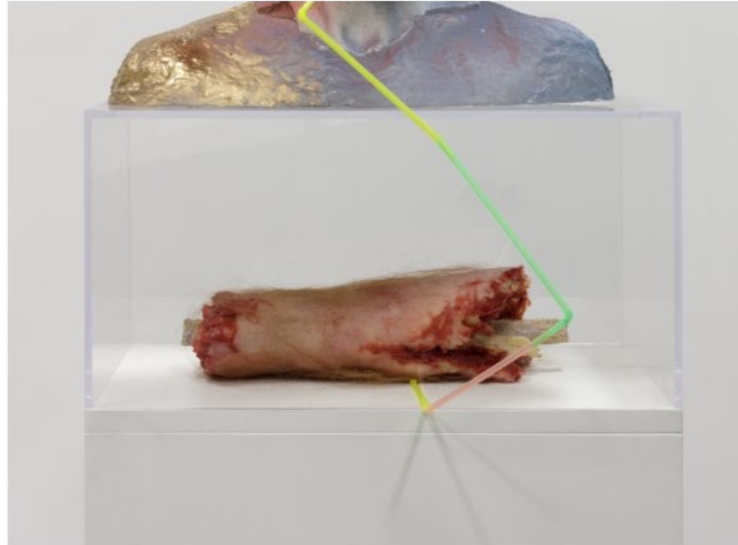


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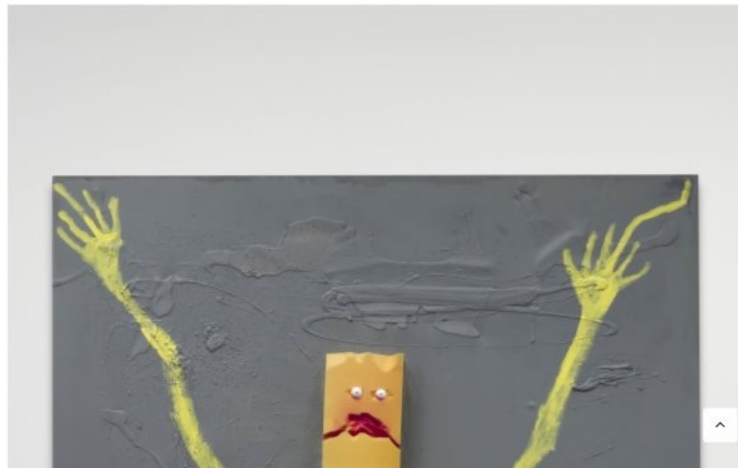
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Nathaniel Mellors at New Museum – Art Viewer



Nathaniel Mellors, *Reliquary Reliquary*, 2016, Resin, drinking straws, paint, polymerized plaster, silicone, hair, Perspex, and wood, 70 x 22 x 21 1/2 in (177.8 x 55.9 x 54.6 cm), Courtesy the artist; the Box, Los Angeles; Matt's Gallery, London; Monitor, Rome; and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam



<https://artviewer.org/nathaniel-mellors-at-new-museum/>

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Nathaniel Mellors at New Museum – Art Viewer



Nathaniel Mellors, *Original Crucifixion*, 2017, Acrylic and floor paint, sponge, polystyrene, and spray paint on canvas, 100 x 85 x 6 1/4 in (254 x 215.9 x 15.9 cm), Courtesy the artist; the Box, Los Angeles; Matt's Gallery, London; Monitor, Rome; and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam

<https://artviewer.org/nathaniel-mellors-at-new-museum/>

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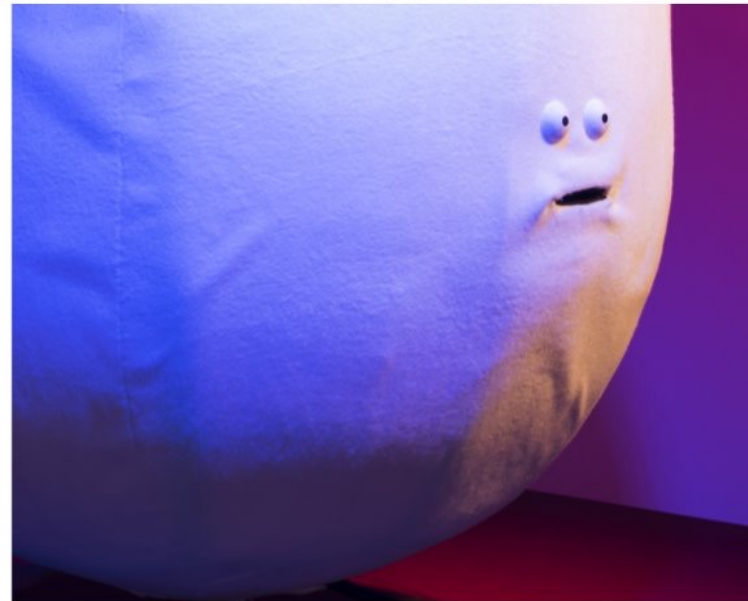
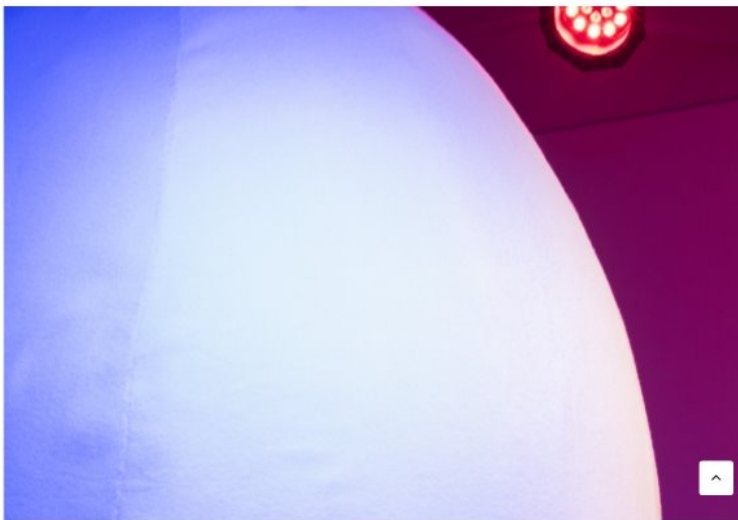
Nathaniel Mellors, *Neanderthal Container*, 2015, HD video, sound, color; 20:32 min, Commissioned by Taipei Biennial 2014, Courtesy the artist; the Box, Los Angeles; Matt's Gallery, London; Monitor, Rome; and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam



Nathaniel Mellors, *Neanderthal Container*, 2015, HD video, sound, color; 20:32 min, Commissioned by Taipei Biennial 2014, Courtesy the artist; the Box, Los Angeles; Matt's Gallery, London; Monitor, Rome; and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam



Nathaniel Mellors, *Neanderthal Container: Animatronic Prelaps*, 2015, Painted silicone, steel, wood, and animatronic mechanisms, Dimensions variable, Courtesy the artist; the Box, Los Angeles; Matt's Gallery, London; Monitor, Rome; and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam



Nathaniel Mellors and Erkkä Nissinen, *The Aalto Natives (Floored Version)*, 2017–18, Animatronic sculpture: steel, wood, and silicone, Three-channel HD video, sound, color; 53:34 min, *The Aalto Natives* was originally commissioned by Frame Finland for the 2017 Venice Biennale with the generous support of The Mondriaan Fund and the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam, Courtesy the artist; the Box, Los Angeles; Matt's Gallery, London; Monitor, Rome; and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam



Nathaniel Mellors, *The Vomiter (Ourhouse)*, 2010, Painted silicone, paper pulp, bucket, silicone hose, peristaltic pump, Perspex, steel, wood, and animatronic mechanism, Dimensions variable, Courtesy the artist; the Box, Los Angeles; Matt's Gallery, London; Monitor, Rome; and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam



Nathaniel Mellors, *The Sophisticated Neanderthal Interview*, 2014, 35mm film transferred to HD video, sound, color, 23:19 min, Commissioned by the Hammer Museum with the support of The Mondriaan Fund and Temple Bar

April 9, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2332 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Beginnings, Multi-tasking, Independence, Success.

On pushing in different directions

An interview with artist Nathaniel Mellors

Your work encompasses a number of creative practices—filmmaking, sculpture, animation, sound design, puppeteering. Is it liberating to have so many options at your disposal, or when you're faced with seemingly unlimited options for expressing ideas, does it make it harder to choose a path? Do you ever suffer from option paralysis?

I quite often think it would be liberating to just fucking make and sell paintings. You know what I mean? Option paralysis. That is interesting. I've never experienced that, honestly. I think usually there is some central idea or image that occurs for me which is like a battery for me in developing some kind of narrative or some sort of characters or certain ideas to explore. Then, pursuing those ideas carries me through and leads me to certain forms. I suppose with scriptwriting and making videos or working with actors or with puppets it's all still the same kind of process. The choices that you're making about puppets or sculptures or animatronics or these different forms, there is always some reason as to why it's been made that way. In my mind, there is usually some kind of logic at work, no matter how perverse those particular choices might seem to the viewer.

You've worked a lot with animatronic figures and other kinds of technology-driven art, but you seem cognizant that technology and spectacle is kind of meaningless unless it's in service of good ideas.

I think it's true. It's very hard. I'm thinking about guitarists, now that you said that. Like the perennial problem of people being in awe to technique, so they can't ever past that. They are technically amazing, but boring. There is definitely a lot of art that suffers in that way. I was in a fortunate position when I started doing the animatronic work. I was at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam where there was quite a lot of technological support. Not having any real technical ability, I was able to develop an approach that was kind of semi-liberated because of my ineptitude. My work didn't

suffer from perfection because I literally didn't know what I was doing.



Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks
2018. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

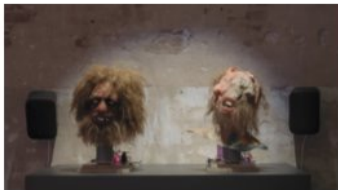
There was just a retrospective of your work in NYC. How do you generally organize your creative life? Are you always working towards a show or trying to convince someone to fund something?

I'm always on the verge of retirement. [Laughs] I'm always telling myself I am not fucking doing this again. It depends. What you're talking about is kind of symptomatic of the environment people are working in a lot of the time. I do think that in America it is potentially hard for people to do this thing where you just make whatever you want to. This idea that you just make stuff. You just make the art you want to make. Because, basically, what you're talking about, something that I've always strongly believed in, is really hard because you feel disappointed to do it due to the business of the art world. Artists should be

the ones deciding the terms of contemporary art through the work they make, but often it feels the other way around.

Why is it not that way, because artists don't control the spaces?

Because they feel insecure about careers and because people are usually saddled with gigantic debt, particularly in America, after their art school education. It's really hard for them not to assimilate into a predominately commercial structure right from the beginning. I'm lucky because I've had some public support through various European structures and the Netherlands and countries where they have a different model. I left London and went the Netherlands because I was struggling. I was in debt and I didn't know how to go forward in a way that was ambitious. I felt like I could go forward at that level, but I couldn't really develop within those kinds of constraints. It was in the middle of a booming art market in the early to mid 2000s where people were opening new galleries every week and lots of new art was being sold, but it wasn't the kind of work I wanted to make.



Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks
2018. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

That was one of the reasons I left London and I think in America it's even harder. I don't really know what the answer to that is except to say that maybe people have to start trying to do it a different way. You've got to be resourceful and you've got to be very confident and inflexible and find ways to make work. Maybe making good work just involves losing money.. and who is in a position to do that?

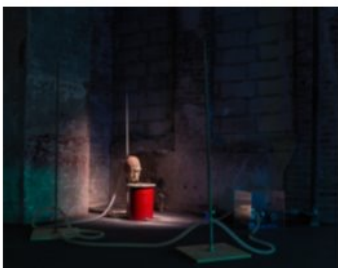
Your work is often comprised of large-scale pieces which, I would assume, present many complications. How do you know when something isn't going to work? Or do you keep problem-solving with the materials until it eventually bends to your will?

I think it depends. I will certainly abandon things. I've spent six months or a year on a script in the past to develop something until it feels like it's working and eventually I'll know. You sort of know early on with things whether there's space you can

move into with an idea. You can feel that the space is there or that potential is there with certain ideas. Then it's just a question of following these lines of thought and most of the time it's like that, it eventually works. I don't usually hit a wall. I'm quite good at stepping sideways around blocks and trying to look at problems as opportunities. There is quite a lot of improvisation that happens along the way, but at the bottom, the deeper things that are going on need to be in place from the beginning in order for everything else to work. Quite often there are these intense periods of writing where you're working through ideas in all of these different ways. I've certainly given up on bits of writing and trashed a lot of paintings. Certain ways of working are more forgiving than others, that's for sure.

If it's a big animatronic piece—a big robot head—it's probably much harder to say, "You know what, let's just scrap this. I'm not really feeling this anymore."

Yeah, I've got a few expensive... well, I don't want to call them failures really, but I've got a few things sitting around in the studio, a few wayward creations, that haven't found their home. They need to be sent off on a fucking backpack tour of Europe to find themselves.



Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks
2018. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

Your wife is a painter. What are the benefits of being in a relationship with another artist?

This is a hard one to make a generalization about. Honestly, in the past I had reached a point where I promised myself I would never date another artist again, but this relationship has been brilliant, and great for both of us. We're fans of each other's works and there's a kind of crossover into each other's work, even though we're working in totally different ways. It's been mutually beneficial.

It's only gotten challenging with a child, a two year old, and a pregnancy in the mix, but those are challenging things for anyone under any circumstance. We are lucky because we can sort of take days off. We can sort of do two or three days a week and, with a bit of luck, still be productive. I think it's harder when you're younger, when there's this feeling that you're trying to fight for your place. That can be really hard. Another artist can understand what that feels like and what the demands are, but you've got to be secure enough to give each other space and not be obsessively trying to drive your career career at the expense of your relationship.

The question of whether two artists can get along has a lot to do with the myth of the artistic temperament—the idea that two very self-involved creative people can't possibly be compatible.

I suppose it depends on your levels of self-absorption, how those things function for you, and what your working patterns are and your personality. We've been lucky. It's not always easy, but I feel like it would also be really hard to be in a relationship with somebody who was working a regular 9 to 5.

You have a background in noise and industrial music. Why do you think you gravitated towards making visual art rather than being a musician? Or do those two things feel connected for you?

I don't know. I mean, I never stopped doing music. I still have some projects, but at a certain point making visual art took off for me in a way that music didn't. The musical thing that I was part of was through friendships that I had—and still have—connected to where I grew up. It's connected to the sort of provincial, local part of Southeast England where I was in my teens. It was this very funny scene—post-punks, hippie, industrial, goths, and psychedelics. Lots of people doing LSD and speed. Growing up there, I didn't know anything about contemporary art. I only really knew about people like Francis Bacon or Picasso. I only knew about Throbbing Gristle and going to see shows, that sort of thing.



Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks
2018. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

Knowing that I wanted to paint and draw took me to university where I discovered this whole realm of contemporary art, performance art, installation, and video. In a way, that swallowed everything up for me. I felt like I could bring everything I was interested in into that world somehow. I could bring the music stuff I was interested in into my art-making, but it didn't quite seem to work the other way around. though now, on reflection, I see how that's possible. Art was something I could develop on my own terms, whereas music was something I did that was very much about working in groups of people where I was not by any means the most talented person involved. I'm honestly not technically a very good musician. I can write and improvise, but it's not where I'm best suited. It's a tricky question and something I think about—why do you end up doing this thing instead of this other thing?—but I think you gravitate towards the thing that feels the most natural.

It's interesting when people have multiple creative lines. It's healthy to do these different things that inform each other.

I think so. I want to explore that idea more. My ambition for the next year is to do the family stuff, but also just to write and paint and do some stuff that I can do in one room for awhile. I'm more excited about what I can do in one room—maybe writing, painting, and doing some music—than I am about taking on a big project which involves working with a lot of people for a big deadline with big budgets and whatnot. I like to think of the process being like the tides going in and out. You can't always try pushing forward all the time with one particular methodology. You've got to push in different directions at once in order for the overall arc to be moving in an interesting way. Otherwise, you just end up becoming a mannequin of your own fucking self, which is really often a trap for anybody that does something interesting.

If you aren't careful your art becomes product. You become like a creative director of a brand that happens to be your name.

You see this all the time. People become less an artist and more just a manager of their studio. Whenever you look at that stuff, it's always like, "Oh well, there was the early stuff that was really cool and then there is just all this other stuff that sort of refers back to it." I don't want to do that. I want to make something new.



Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks
2018. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

Name
Nathaniel Mellors

Vocation
Visual Artist

Fact



Photo Credit: Ricky Adam

Nathaniel Mellors recommends:

Books

Howard Zinn - A People's History of the United States (Harper Perennial)

Clayton Eshleman - Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld (Wesleyan, 2003)

Susan Sontag - Styles of Radical Will (Picador 2002)

Brian Catling - The Vorrh (Vintage, 2015)

Georges Sataille - Visions of Excess (University of Minnesota Press 1985)

Music

Coil - The Ape of Naples

Catherine Ribiero + Alpes - Paix

Swans - Children of God

The Fall - The Unutterable

Throbbing Gristle - Thee Psychick Sacrifice

Film

Pier-Paolo Pasolini - Porcile / Salo

William Klein - Mr Freedom (1968) / The Little Richard Story (1980)

Aleksei German - Hard To Be A God

Black Lives Matter. We stand in solidarity with those affected by generations of structural violence. You can help.

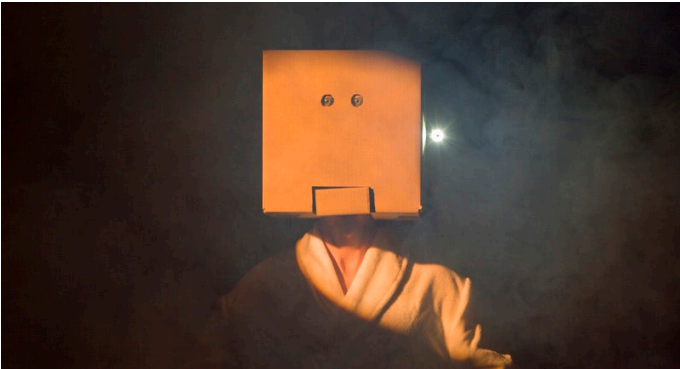
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NATHANIEL MELLORS: *Progressive Rocks*

MAR 2018

By William Corwin



Nathaniel Mellors and Erkka Nissinen, *The Aalto Natives (Floored Version)*, 2017–18. Animatronic sculpture, steel, wood, and silicone, three-channel HD video, sound, color; 53:34 minutes. The Aalto Natives was originally commissioned by Frame Finland for the 2017 Venice Biennale with the generous support of The Mondriaan Fund and the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam. Courtesy the artist; the Box, Los Angeles; Matt's Gallery, London; Monitor, Rome; and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam.

On View

New Museum

February 6 – April 15, 2018
New York

Nathaniel Mellors's visually seductive series of videos and attendant props, animatronic installations, and paintings are part of a process of re-interpreting closely held mythologies, the result of which is primarily a literary exploration. *Progressive Rocks* is a cycle of four substantial video works that require a commitment of time and attention amounting to over two-and-a-half hours. Margot Norton's curation plays to the theatrical nature of Mellors's enterprise by guiding the viewer through the space in a circular motion, creating a central square core of flickering screens. Enclosed in this core is the heart of the exhibition, Mellors's collaboration with Erkka Nissinen, *The Aalto Natives* (2017), the installation that inhabited the Finnish Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale and which has been substantially reconfigured for the New Museum. The space is necessarily dark to provide a proper ambience for the videos, so the non-luminous works, a series of several paintings, sculptures, and animatronic installations are brightly lit, emerging from the darkness and preventing the viewer from getting any real sense of the gallery space. This is perhaps a not-so-odd coincidence, as the interiors presented in Mellors's videos have a similarly murky and disembodied quality, always shifting the viewer's attention to the conversations taking place. The animatronic objects in *Progressive Rocks* are all heads that either speak, as in the centerpiece of *The Aalto Natives (Floored Version)* (2017-18), attempt to speak, *Neanderthal Container: Animatronic Prelaps* (2014), or are prevented from speaking *The Vomiter (Ourhouse)* (2010); a gruesome being which vomits forth words in the form of a digested book.

Mellors's dramatic interactions tend to follow a Socratic model—a naïf is schooled on reality by a wiser, and in most cases groovier, foil who unpacks the philosophical, socio-political, and aesthetic assumptions of his/her interlocutor. The chosen foil(s) in *The Sophisticated Neanderthal Interview* (2014), *Neanderthal Container* (2014), and *Ourhouse Episode 1: Games* (2015-16) are cheeky, hairy, and streetwise *homo neanderthalensis* geezers who have smug and nihilistic answers to questions about their species' art-making and cultural capabilities. While some of the conversation is redolent of Douglas Adams (a compliment) and other '70s and '80s British comedy, Mellors's does a good job of dissecting our own cultural insecurities playing out through our current obsession with our hominid predecessors. In *Interview* and *Ourhouse* the Neanderthals discuss or engage in making art, and then attempt to, or actually do manage to eat their *homo sapiens* companions, adding a final coup de grace to Mellors's argument that both everything and nothing is art. *Ourhouse* and *The Aalto Natives*—two videos both clocking in at almost an hour each—delve a bit further into the stabilizing and destabilizing aspects of mythologies. *Ourhouse* features a fabulous monster who, like the family he terrorizes, has been a staple of the video series since the beginning. *The Object*, played by Brian Catling, is a creature who devours the books in the library of an upper middle class family. We see him as a silhouette, ripping pages from a book and stuffing them in his mouth in an insatiable frenzy—an uncontrollable, intuitive, anti-intellectual impulse personified, not cognizant of the destruction he wreaks—he just keeps eating. Against this growing mist of cultural entropy, the upper-middle class Wilson family does its best to cope by building time machines and having entertaining philosophical discussions. *The Aalto Natives* is a series of alternating projections emanating from an animatronic centerpiece of a dismembered body sprouting two heads: a giant egg and a cardboard box. These two heads are gods, a father and son, who narrate their creation of Finland, and consequently return a million years later. In the interim, things have gone a bit awry: what's necessary to know is that these social defects are not far from our own. While it's necessary to pay attention and follow Mellors's convoluted plot-lines, the discussions and vignettes are such that they function well as little skits within a greater whole and convey at least part of the message in smaller and poignant bite-size bits.



Nathaniel Mellors and Erkka Nissinen, *The Aalto Natives (Floored Version)*, 2017–18. Animatronic sculpture, steel, wood, and silicone, three-channel HD video, sound, color; 53:34 minutes. The Aalto Natives was originally commissioned by Frame Finland for the 2017 Venice Biennale with the generous support of The Mondriaan Fund and the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam. Courtesy the artist; the Box, Los Angeles; Matt's Gallery, London; Monitor, Rome; and Stigter van Doesburg, Amsterdam.

Progressive Rocks revels in its all-over-the-map messiness, but there is a wonderful and cogent dialogue between the video and animatronic objects. The paintings such as *New Age Crucifixion* (2017) and *Original Crucifixion* (2017) seem out of place, despite appearing in the background of the *Ourhouse*, but there is a tradition of including props from video and film work ranging from Carolee Schneemann to Mike Kelley. There is a wonderful, arcane animatronic piece in the La Brea Tar Pits Museum displaying an extinct saber-tooth tiger attacking a similarly extinct sloth. Something about the dull, plodding, repetitive inevitability of the tiger finishing off his prey speaks to Mellors's message in both his kinetic pieces and videos. Animatronic displays are a futile attempt at re-creating reality; they inevitably just make things seem weirder. Mellors uses this surreal space and runs with it, producing moving objects whose animatronic claim on reality is at complete odds to their subject matter: a fanciful mutant Neanderthal head resembling Sloth from *The Goonies* writhing around on a tabletop. *Neanderthal Container: Animatronic prelaps* is a good example. We project much of our collective social sensitivities onto both our notions of art making and historical analysis,

William Corwin, 'Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks', The Brooklyn Rail, March 2018, <https://brooklynrail.org/2018/03/artseen/Nathaniel-Mellors-Progressive-Rocks>

when in fact, both of these activities take place in a space of localized and personal influences having no relation to our current environment and our contemporary notions of art or history. Still, we try to fit that square peg into a round hole.

Contributor

~~William Corwin~~

Will Corwin is a sculptor and writer from New York. He has written for *Frieze*, *Bomb* and writes for *ArtPapers*. He will be part of the Root/Anchors show at The Newhouse Contemporary Art Center, Snug Harbor, this fall and is represented by Geary Contemporary.

ART

At The New Museum, Nathaniel Mellors Strains for Laughs

by PAC POBRIC

FEBRUARY 16, 2018



Still from Nathaniel Mellors and Erkkä Nissinen's "The Aalto Natives" (2017) COURTESY THE ARTIST; THE BOX, LOS ANGELES; MATT'S GALLERY, LONDON; MONITOR, ROME; AND STIGTER VAN DOESBURG, AMSTERDAM

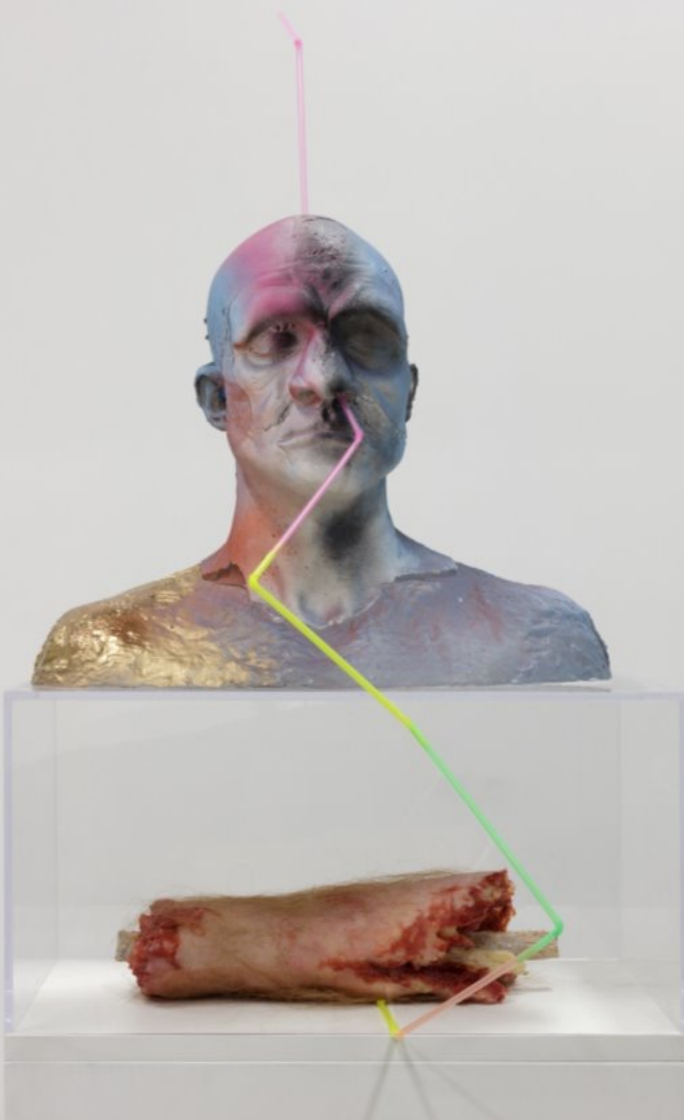
The English artist Nathaniel Mellors seems unsure of himself. Is it humor he's after? That's the initial impression of his exhibition "Progressive Rocks" at the New Museum, his first New York solo show. Just past the entrance to the single gallery presentation—which includes four large-scale videos, a photograph, some sculptures, and a couple trifling paintings—there's a film projected onto a screen in front of a bench. The film, like the others in the show, was written and directed by the artist, and this one was shot in the California desert. It tells the silly story of a boyish man named Truson (played by David Birkin), who has stumbled upon a Neanderthal (Patrick Kennedy) outside a cave and cannot believe his strange good luck. He pulls out a video camera to record his discovery and peppers his new friend with questions. What's the meaning of cave painting? How did he make those pictures of animals? What was he trying to say?



"The Sophisticated Neanderthal Interview" (2014) COURTESY THE ARTIST; THE BOX, LOS ANGELES; MATT'S GALLERY, LONDON; MONITOR, ROME; AND STIGTER VAN DOESBURG, AMSTERDAM

The caveman, at first, is articulate and open to conversation. But the questions are naive and grating, and Truson—who wears a baby blue knit hat styled for a newborn—repeats himself incessantly. The dialogue is aimless, and before long, the Neanderthal senses that we are going nowhere. He throws his hands into the air, calls the whole conversation “a big bag of cocks,” and then apologizes when he feels he’s gone too far.

The first few minutes of the work, titled *The Sophisticated Neanderthal Interview*, are slightly charming, but the gag never develops beyond the initial conceit that it would be funny if a caveman were more refined than a childish *Homo sapiens*. In two related films, which again star the Neanderthal, now in entirely new situations, the idea slackens even further. In one of them, titled *Ourhouse—Episode 1*, he tries to prove his cunning by inventing a time-traveling toilet. How Mellors came up with the idea is anyone's guess; he seems to like non sequiturs, and many of his artistic decisions seem unmotivated. Still, there is a genuinely droll moment in the film, in which the Neanderthal, now wearing pleated gray slacks and a dandyish scarf, says, “All of my toilets are made with Aztec porcelain and have a brutalist trim.”



"Reliquary Reliquary" (2016) COURTESY THE ARTIST; THE BOX, LOS ANGELES; MATT'S GALLERY, LONDON; MONITOR, ROME; AND STIGTER VAN DOESBURG, AMSTERDAM

But humor is not Mellors' strong suit. He is much better with his frightful and impressive sculptures of lifelike animatronic limbs that look like the severed remains of cyborgs. One of them replicates the head of the caveman and spins around ominously while his jaw flaps up and down. Another sculpture is the mutated, melted head of a man with an eye and an ear on his forehead. These works move in disconcerting ways, as does the best sculpture in the show, *The Vomiter*, where a bald man has a plastic tube coming out of his throat through which he throws up into an enlarged red solo cup.



"The Vomiter (Ourhouse)" 2010 ALEXANDER NEWTON

These genuinely unsettling objects are unfortunately few in this exhibition, but

Mellors, who was born in 1974 in Doncaster, England, has made more in the past. Sometimes, they come in pairs, like *Hippy Dialectics* (which he showed in London in 2011), where two heads (one covered in an alien blue skin) are connected by a long, scraggly beard. Works like these aren't completely humorless; they have some of the grotesque fun that's so prevalent in Bruce Nauman's obscene neon light sculptures, one of which shows a hanged cartoon man with a giant erection. So it's conceivable that Mellors could mine his distressing work for comedic effect, but he needs to strike a better balance.



"Original Crucifixion" 2017 (left) and "The Aalto Natives" by Erkka Nissinen and Nathaniel Mellors (2017) COURTESY THE ARTIST; THE BOX, LOS ANGELES; MATT'S GALLERY, LONDON; MONITOR, ROME; AND STIGTER VAN DOESBURG, AMSTERDAM; UGO CARMENI

That's most obvious in the show's biggest installation, *The Aalto Natives (Floored Version)*, which is adapted from his joint presentation with the Finnish artist Erkka

Nissinen at the Finnish Pavilion in the most recent Venice Biennale. Across four separate screens, a group of muppets devised by Mellors and Nissinen tell a convoluted story about the history of life. One of the characters, Atum, has a cardboard box for a head; the other, his father, Geb, is a giant talking egg.

In the Venice presentation, the emphasis was on whimsy. When one of the muppets sang a song in the Finnish Pavilion about the history of the country, his sweetness rose above the story’s overall lack of direction. But in New York, the work is shown in a room where the centerpiece is a newly made animatronic sculpture of severed human body parts, which poisons the joy. On their own, the separate parts might work well: the strangeness of the sculpture could deepen if it weren’t forced to fit into a larger narrative, and the film could offer a small dose of irreverent amusement. As it stands, Mellors is trying to do too much at once, and some simplifications could do him a large favor.

‘Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks’

The New Museum

235 Bowery

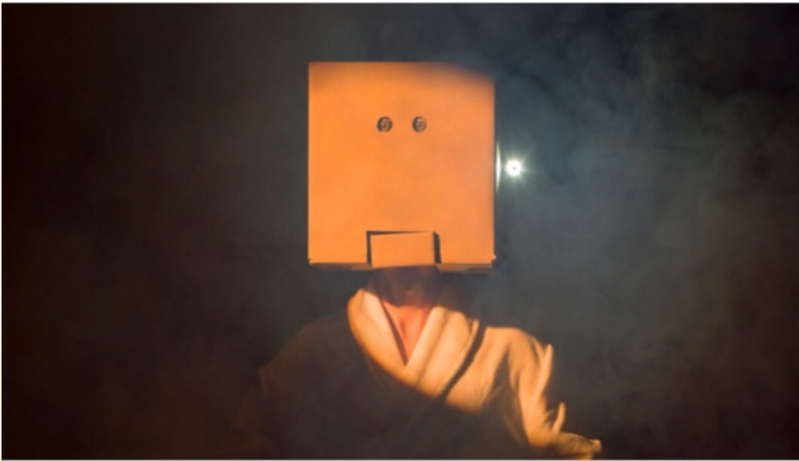
212-219-1222

[*newmuseum.org*](http://newmuseum.org)

Through April 15



"Neanderthal Container" (2015) COURTESY THE ARTIST; THE BOX, LOS ANGELES; MATT'S GALLERY, LONDON; MONITOR, ROME; AND STIGTER VAN DOESBURG, AMSTERDAM



Nathaniel Mellors and Erkkä Nissinen "The Aalto Natives (Floored Version)" (2017-18) COURTESY THE ARTIST; THE BOX, LOS ANGELES; MATT'S GALLERY, LONDON; MONITOR, ROME; AND STIGTER VAN DOESBURG, AMSTERDAM



"Neanderthal Container: Animatronic Prelaps" (2015) COURTESY THE ARTIST; THE BOX, LOS ANGELES; MATT'S GALLERY, LONDON; MONITOR, ROME; AND STIGTER VAN DOESBURG, AMSTERDAM

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TO DO

The best art exhibits in your area

"Birds of a Feather: Joseph Cornell's Homage to Juan Gris"

This show brings together a series of works by Cornell (1903–1972), inspired by his admiration for the Spanish Cubist Gris—especially the latter's 1914 painting *The Man at the Café*. Cornell felt a deep affinity for Gris that he described as "fraternal," a bond in full display in this selection, which includes 18 of Cornell's signature shadow boxes.

→ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Ave (212-535-7710, metmuseum.org). Through Apr 15.

"Derrick Adams: Sanctuary"

Using mixed-media meditations on the notion of sanctuary, the artist reimagines a Depression-era pamphlet that guided African-American motorists to safe destinations in the Jim Crow South.

→ Museum of Arts & Design, 2 Columbus Circle (212-299-7777, madmuseum.org). Through Aug 12.

Daniel Dewar & Grégory Gicquel, "Rosa Aurora Rosa"

Traditional crafts—weaving, marquetry, wood carving—factor prominently in the work of this collaborative duo, whose sculptures take a wry and roundabout approach to figurative art.

→ CLEARING, 396 Johnson Ave, Brooklyn (718-456-0396, c-i-e-a-i-b-g.com). Through Mar 11.

"Leon Golub: Raw Nerve"

The career of Figurative

Expressionist Golub (1922–2004) is recalled in all its furious glory in this wide-ranging survey. Golub, whose paintings combined modern and classical themes, was an unabashed man of the left, a speaker of truth to power who decried war and torture in a style of paint-handling that was as violent as the subjects of his attacks.

→ The Met Breuer, 945 Madison Ave (212-731-1675, metmuseum.org). Through May 27.

Ebecho Muslimova

Fatebe, the corpulently nude, linearly rendered alter ego of Ebecho Muslimova, returns in this new show of the Russian-born Brooklyn artist's comical, absurdist paintings.

→ Magenta Plains, 94 Allen St (917-388-2464, magentaplains.com). Through Sun 11.

"Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks"

The fantastical and the sardonically cynical come together in videos and audio-animated tableaux by this British artist, who divides his time between L.A. and Amsterdam. Mellors plumbs the foibles and divine lunacy of that fragile state known as the human condition.

→ New Museum of Contemporary Art, 235 Bowery (212-219-1222, newmuseum.org). Through Apr 14.

Sondra Perry

The vicissitudes of race in digital space is the subject of this multimedia artist, who focuses here on her twin brother, a college basketball player whose image was licensed for a video without his permission.

→ Bridget Donahue, 99 Bowery, second floor (646-896-1368, bridgetdonahue.nyc). Through Feb 25.

Tarsila do Amaral

MoMA's retrospective of Brazilian artist Do Amaral (1886–1973) profiles a foundational figure in Latin American modern art, whose mix of Surrealism and nods to Matisse yielded figurative scenes that were both languid in tone and fantastical in nature.

→ Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), 11 W 53rd St (212-708-9400, moma.org). Gen 11–June 3.



TIME OUT LOVES

Our top picks this week



EMI WINTER

In recent years, this American painter (born and raised in Oaxaca, Mexico) has moved from abstraction to a combination of naively rendered imagery and Spanish texts that reflect on her roots South of the Border.

→ Ullstein Gallery, 172 Attorney St (917-472-7784, ullsteingallery.com). Through Feb 25.

DANH VO

Political in scope yet personal in tone, Vo's projects draw on his background as a Vietnam War refugee to plumb the nexus of power, history and identity.

→ Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Ave (212-423-3500, guggenheim.org). Fri 9–May 9.

RICHARD HAWKINS

Sex tourism in Thailand serves as the backdrop for these paintings and drawings by the L.A. artist, whose work delves into the extremes of longing and desire.

→ Greene Naftali, 508 W 26th St (212-463-7770, greene-naftali.com). Through Mar 3.

LUCIA HIERRO

Part Claes Oldenburg, part commodity fetishism, Hierro's oversize, product-stuffed shopping bags may appear to critique consumer society, but their real aim is to echo the rhythms of daily life in working-class immigrant communities.

→ Elizabeth Dee Gallery, 2033-2037 Fifth Ave (212-924-7545, elizabethdee.com). Through Feb 24.

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NATHANIEL MELLORS: PROGRESSIVE ROCKS

02/06/18-04/15/18

The fantastical and wryly comical videos, sculptures, and installations by Los Angeles– and Amsterdam-based artist Nathaniel Mellors (b. 1974, Doncaster, UK) employ absurdist satire to incisively critique morality, national identity, religion, and power structures in contemporary society.

South Galleries, Ground Floor
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Cover Image: Nathaniel Mellors, *The Vomiter* (Ourhouse), 2010. Animatronic sculpture with silicon hose, peristaltic pump, painted silicon, wood, steel, paper pulp, and bucket, dimensions variable. Photo: Alexander Newton. Courtesy the artist. The Box, Los Angeles; Matt's Gallery, London; Monitor, Rome; and Stigler van Doesburg, Amsterdam

Conflating narrative tropes and methods from television sitcoms, theater, science fiction, mythology, and anthropology, Mellors writes the scripts for each of his projects, which he also directs, edits, and produces. His raucous films feature a book-eating creature named "The Object" who literally digests a family's library in *Ourhouse* (2010–ongoing); a Neanderthal in perpetual free-fall over the San Joaquin Valley in *Neanderthal Container*, (2014); and two messianic beings, in the form of a cardboard box and a giant egg, who attempt to make sense of a culture that they created millions of years prior in *The Aalto Natives* (2017, in collaboration with Erikka Nissinen, originally conceived for the Finnish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale). For his exhibition at the New Museum, Mellors has created a new environment including video projection and animatronic sculpture.

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Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks" is curated by Margot Norton, Curator, and is on view in the New Museum's recently inaugurated South Galleries, a space designated for premiering new productions at the Museum. The South Galleries preserve the character of the building's loft spaces, where many artists historically worked and exhibited.

Nathaniel Mellors was born in 1974 in Doncaster, UK, and lives and works in Los Angeles and Amsterdam. Solo exhibitions include the Box, Los Angeles (2016); Center for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw (2014); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2014); Galway Arts Centre, Ireland (2013); Baltimore Museum of Art (2013); Malmö Konsthall, Sweden (2012); Cobra Museum, Amstelveen, Netherlands (2011); and Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2011). Mellors has also been featured in group exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde, Denmark (2016); the Taipei Biennial, Taiwan (2014); Manifesta Foundation, Amsterdam (2014); National Gallery of the Arts, Tirana (2014); National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Moscow (2013); Kunsthalle Krems, Austria (2013); the Slaughterhouse, Plymouth, UK (2011); Center for Contemporary Art Glasgow (2011); the Hayward Gallery, London (2011); the 54th Venice Biennale (2011); and Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, Italy (2011). He is the recipient of the 2014 Contemporary Art Society Prize and the 2011 Cobra Art Prize. Mellors and Finnish artist Erikka Nissinen represented Finland at the 57th Venice Biennale with their collaborative video installation *The Aalto Natives* (2017).



Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Maria Hutchinson / © JFW Studio

"Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks" 2018. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Maria Hutchinson / © JFW Studio

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Support for this exhibition has been provided by Frame Contemporary Art Finland.

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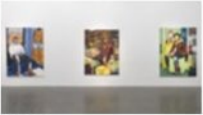


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Nathaniel Mellors in Conversation
with Curator Margot Norton
WEDNESDAY 02/14/2018


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New Museum, 'Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks', <https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/nathaniel-mellors-progressive-rocks>

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Installation

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