

Bambi : Fake Party
by Edwin Ramoran

Pop culture icons—human or otherwise, real or fictional—are always prime targets for parody. Bambi, the most famous anthropomorphic fawn in the world, is no sacred cow. This fictional deer's origin can be traced to the environmentalist Austrian novel *Bambi, A Life in the Woods* (1923) by Felix Salten. Then, of course, the Walt Disney Studios made the most popular American adaptation with the animated feature film *Bambi* (1942) that featured the early life of Bambi with his unnamed mother. It was only four years ago that Disney released the straight-to-digital-video sequel titled *Bambi II* centered around the relationship between Bambi and his father The Great Prince of the Forest immediately after the death of Bambi's mother at the hands of human hunters.

A critical response to things cute, superficial, innocent, and traditional—as represented by the youthful Bambi—is found in the experimental cult film short titled *Bambi Meets Godzilla* (1969) by Marv Newland. To pay homage to and also signal a break from early depictions of Bambi, this one-and-a-half minute short comprised of numerous pages put together as stop-motion animation is set to the Ranz des Vaches from Gioacchino Rossini's opera *William Tell*. Before the end of it, a grazing Bambi gets squashed to death by Godzilla's foot. Conversely, Bambi was appropriated by counterculture, punk aesthetics, and the anti-establishment when The Sex Pistols came out with the song "Who Killed Bambi?" written by singer Edward Tudor-Pole and designer Vivienne Westwood, who introduced punk fashion to the masses. Through irony, the second verse of the song reflects an indictment of the hippie generation whose fashion and politics had been absorbed by the mainstream and blamed for the ills and shortcomings of society at large in the late 1970s and early 1980s:

Murder murder murder
Someone should be angry
The crime of the century
Who shot little Bambi
Never trust a hippie
'Cause I love punky Bambi
I'll kill to find the killer
In that rotten roll army
All the spikey punkers
Believers in the ruins
With one big shout
They all cry out
Who killed Bambi?

Who?

This song was included on the soundtrack for Julien Temple's mockumentary movie *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* (1980) about The Sex Pistols as told from the perspective of the band's manager Malcolm McLaren. This film included footage salvaged from the unfinished Russ Meyer film *Who Killed Bambi?* for which McLaren had hired critic and screenwriter Roger Ebert to write the screenplay in 1977. Subsequently, over the past three decades, a number of independent rock music groups formed using the word *Bambi* in their name as a tribute to their angst-driven punk forebears and influences. These bands include Who Killed Bambi?, The Bambi Slam, The Bambi Molesters, and The Bambi Killers.

On the recent commercial front, filmmaker David Lynch's hyperbolic Playstation 2 advertisement *Bambi* (2001), set to idyllic classical music, used computer-generated imagery animation to show the front of a speeding car being totalled after hitting an indestructible super-fawn that walks away unfazed and unscathed from the accident. Last year, fashion designer Stella McCartney's print advertisement campaign, photographed by Ryan McGinley, included cartoon images of Bambi and his animal friends intermingled with live models and real animals to reflect the designer's support of animal rights.

"Camp is the triumph of the epicene..."—Susan Sontag

Jaye Rhee's short three-minute video *Bambi* (2009), in many ways, uniquely expands upon these predecessors by employing a camp sensibility to create a brand-new Bambi experience unlike we have seen before. Within the first minute of this video, the funky, candy-coated stage is like a fake party at a fake park, and a profusely bathetic mood is set. For instance, the accompanying instrumental song was originally composed by Rhee's colleague Justin Marchacos from a simple repeating melody made from notes played on what sounds like a combination of an omnichord, electric organ, or autoharp, canned birds chirping, chimes, and a cymbal. The soundscape is akin to a music box or an ice cream truck or a karaoke version of a pop song made without vocals.

Moreover, Rhee's intentionally syrupy video is a theater of maximalist fakery—the environment is unnatural and primarily comprised of decorative, ornamental, and synthetic objects and materials pretending to be something else. There are close-ups of the thick blades of rolled-out grass sprinkled with numerous colorful plastic hair barrettes, a rabbit figurine, a cuckoo clock, a small birdhouse, and bright yellow toy chicks that look like fuller versions of edible marshmallow peeps. The first profile view of the unblinking glass eye of a taxidermied stag, who could be the stand-in for The Great

Prince of the Forest, and the reflection of a stuffed toy version of another stag produce a conversation exploiting how the real unique animal trophy head was made into a body-less replica; and the mass-produced, skinny-framed, cotton-filled toy deer is what it is—comically and fully fake.

Unlike most of the artist's previous videos in which her own body is visibly present, Rhee still manages to assert her role as author in control of this completely constructed and manipulated performative installation made into a video. For instance, the visible reflection in the dead deer's iris—the blue light emanating from the video camera's lens and the white rays bouncing from the fluorescent ceiling lights and the window of the artist's studio—are details that reinforce the artist's signature and self-awareness.

When the star of this playful setting first walks into the view of the stationary camera sitting on the grass, we get to experience more of how Rhee goes camp and kitsch. The artist purposefully did not replicate Bambi as a male fawn, like the aforementioned examples; instead she introduces her "Bambi"—a non-traditionally cast female chihuahua adorned with white stickers. Where Disney's Bambi is anthropomorphic and exhibits and represents human traits and morals, Rhee's drag-king Bambi is both anthropomorphic and androgynous, subverting the traditionally heterosexist narrative explicit in Disney's love story between Bambi and Faline, for example, and the other heteronormative animal pairings throughout the film.

The chihuahua, a small compact bundle of nervous canine energy, looks almost like her taxidermied father in fur coloration, but they are apparently unrelated species because of obvious differences in traits and features. Bambi definitely does not bear any resemblance to the artificial stuffed toy stag. Yet, Rhee's presentation of this interchange, between real and fake and fawn and dog, proposes and accentuates themes of self-determination, self-definition, self-reflection, and self-construction. Here, numerous aesthetic devices—installation as large-scale collage, pastiche, appliqué on Bambi, a fake set with fake animal friends, etc...—altogether help transform the living, breathing animal into a trope, not unlike how some pet owners put costume reindeer antlers on their cats and dogs during the winter holiday season in the United States. The passive dog is made to play an imposed role.

Moreover, the stuffed toy stag, from all camera angles actually seems trapped within the frame of the elevated mirror, suggesting a fixed identity and making a direct reference to the Lacanian mirror stage. Through digital manipulation, the actual stuffed toy stag seems to have been lifted from the spot in front of the mirror, where it should be, and is relegated to a dimension manifest to us but not physically here, thereby emphasizing more of the psychological or emotional side of identity formation and the unfixed relationship between the signifier and signified.

As the only actor on her own little island, Rhee's Bambi is also fully denied a real

physical relationship with her two fake, actually non-existent, stag dads who are too high up on the wall or caged in behind a white fence to provide any emotional and physical comfort to the anxious and shaky Bambi. She even tries to find some affection in her stone-faced bunny friend fake Thumper, to no avail. At intervals late into the video, Bambi seems quite aware of the camera and stares into the lens then runs away from it as if being chased. Nobody is there to feed Bambi or to really play and frolic around together. She cannot eat the fake grass and there is no babbling brook for water. Basically, there are no other worthwhile earthly distractions. Even, the pleather green chair plunked in the background seems too high for the chihuahua to jump onto and take a nap.

Another quiet detail pops out that enables more questions of identity formation for Bambi. There are three legible Chinese characters on the top side of the mirror, that can possibly proclaim to the non-Chinese reader: "Made in China." In fact, the artist has provided one translation: "Best wishes for prosperity."

"[Those characters] show the boundary between 'real' space and reflected space ... I am interested in what all these things have to say about how we see, how meaning is constructed, and the relation of physical place to psychological place. Relating to this last point, I also want to see how far I can push the practice of constructing images before things dissolve into the un-believable."—Jaye Rhee, artist statement

So, bootleg Bambi has arrived to her fiesta. However, she has left the building, because it is horribly lonely at this fake party.

—Edwin Ramoran, 2010

Sources

The Sex Pistols, *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, sound recording, released 1980.

Susan Sontag. "Notes on Camp." first published 1964.

Biography

Edwin Ramoran is an independent curator who was born in Palm Springs, California and lives in New York City. He is a recipient of a Curatorial Research Fellowship from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the Outbound Residency from apexart. Recently, he was director of exhibitions and programs at Aljira, a center for contemporary art, in Newark, New Jersey. From 2002-2007, he was director and curator for Longwood Arts Project, the contemporary art center of the Bronx Council on the Arts. He was Assistant Curator at The Bronx Museum of the Arts where he worked from 1994 to 2002. He received a BA in Art History with minors in Ethnic Studies and Journalism

from the University of California, Riverside, and is currently an MA candidate in Art History at Hunter College. He has also been a guest curator in New York at the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, PERFROMA 05 at Artists Space, Center for Book Arts, Dieu Donné Papermill and Gallery, Jamaica Center for Arts & Learning, South Asian Women's Creative Collective, and Visual AIDS. His writing has been published in *Nueva Luz*.