

Alexander and Bonin

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Video art

Strange Days review – fishy kisses, naked prancing and ribald revenge

★★★★★

Store X, London

This exhilarating buffet of video art offers stories of metamorphosis and plant sex, Harlem life and queer fratboys. It's overwhelming - but at least there's somewhere to lie down



▲ Hunter and hunted ... a still from Jonathas de Andrade's *O Peixe* (The Fish), 2016. Photograph: Courtesy Alexander and Bonin Gallery and Galeria Vermelho

Strange Days: *Memories of the Future* is overwhelming: complex, at times annoying and confusing, repetitive, uplifting and baffling. Like life, really. Films and videos by 21 artists are spread over three floors of the Store X on London's Strand. Following the Hayward Gallery's *The Infinite Mix* here in 2016, this exhibition features artists who have all shown at New York's New Museum over the last decade. There is dancing. There is singing. There are stories - too many to recount here - and there is sex. You'll go fishing in the Amazon, have a wild old time in Ryan Trecartin's queer frat-house (along with lots of cosmetics, live baby chickens and a horse), swim beneath the decaying lily pads on a blue autumnal day with Pipilotti Rist and enter a world of horticultural sex and death with Laure Prouvost.

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▲ Laure Prouvost, *Into All That Is Here*, 2015.
Photograph: Elisabeth Bernstein/Courtesy Lisson Gallery

“You are dying slowly,” announces a subtitle in Prouvost’s recent video *Into All That is Here*. She is not wrong. “You need to go deeper ... you have to look for things ... Have a cigarette.” If only, after all those rampant stamens and wilting petals, all that moisture, all that heat, the slurping butterflies and drowning wasps. I had to go and have a lie down in a dimly lit room filled with beds and couches, with Rist’s underwater frolics

projected on to the ceiling above, and someone singing something soft yet gruelling among the bubbles, the naked breasts, the wrinkled underwater fingers, blood dissolving in green water. Rist and Prouvost make a good artistic coupling, lulling you into a show that is in many ways a picaresque descent through a building and through the world.

Naked except for a thick layer of body paint, [Lili Reynaud-Dewar](#) also takes a cigarette break and checks her phone, after some heavy duty prancing, stretching and doing a few press-ups among the deeply perverse sculptures of Austrian artist [Bruno Gironcoli](#), with their odd amalgam of humans and baroque machines, fanciful body parts and peculiar appendages. Reynaud-Dewar gets among them, like a hunter. Or a critic, perhaps, dancing the sculpture, mimicking its forms and its weirdness, almost as a choreographed critique. Nearby, an animation by [Oliver Laric](#) is a constant metamorphosis, a cycle of human and animal transformation, full of fanciful and frightening creatures and superheroes, comic book cuteness and slithery CGI, manga, the Disneyesque and the Picassoid rolling into one another. Nearby, [Wu Tsang](#)’s *The Looks* introduces us to the performer Blis - played by someone called [boychild](#). Blis sways and sings, an ethereal presence whose every inch of exposed skin is covered in silvery glittering sequins, and with a winking LED light in their mouth. Blis and boychild are a kind of spectral composite being. It is hard to tear oneself away.

There is so much going on in *Strange Days* that the exhibition demands several visits. Seeing everything would be impossible, not to say unendurable, in a single encounter. Free entry makes multiple viewings possible. I go from Blis’s queer performance to a long vérité film in which Amazonian fishermen, with their nets and their lines and their guile catch and then caress their quarry, holding the jerking fish against their chests, soothing and caressing and even kissing them in [Jonathas de Andrade](#)’s *O Peixe* (*The Fish*). De Andrade asked the fishermen to perform this gesture, unfamiliar in their everyday activity on the river. Not only does *O Peixe* record moments in which the relationship between hunter and the hunted is transformed by this simple, transient gesture but it also immerses us in the fishermen’s relationship to the river, their closeness to the fragile natural resource on which they subsist.

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Nearby, [John Akomfrah's](#) three-screen *Vertigo Sea* thunders away, and [Anri Sala's](#) three-minute film of a cymbal caught in a strobe light quivers madly. It isn't always the biggest, most complex works that stay in your head. Two men - an office worker and a beefy guy who looks like a cab driver - dance in a room in Cairo to traditional *Shaabi* music, their moves alternating between tenderness and aggression in [Hassan Khan's](#) *Jewel*. *Jungle of Desire*, a ribald and obscene animation by Wong Ping, tells the story of a film animator who imagines taking revenge against his sex-worker wife's latest client, a cop who refuses to pay for her services. With its escalating sexual humiliations, Wong's hilarious film is a veiled comment on the iniquities of life in Hong Kong. Or you could just take it as light relief.

The deeper you go through the exhibition, with its subterranean floors and labyrinthine corridors and galleries, the more the stories, the places and scenes multiply.

Strange Days is bookended by two very different works that are worth the trip alone. [Kahlil Joseph's](#) *Fly Paper* is a 20-minute homage to Harlem, to his family, to jazz, to black culture. Filled with memorable images: a man in a white suit lying in an empty bath, thinking; a musician manhandling a bass drum up tenement stairs. Doubles dancing together in bleak rooms. There are greetings on the corner, trips through hospital corridors, grief and happiness. Part autobiography and homage to his family, part celebration of black music (Joseph directed the first version of Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, and has previously worked with *Flying Lotus*), *Fly Paper* is both abrasive and lyrical, and visually astonishing. I lose myself as in a big, baggy novel. Lauryn Hill appears, as do writer [Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts](#) and comedian Alzo Slade. You want to watch it again and again. This exceptional work ends with a quote from [Chris Marker's](#) film *Sans Soleil*. "If they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black."

Much later, at the end of the show, we meet [the National](#), performing their song *Sorrow* 95 times, over and over, in a live performance at MoMA PS1 in 2013. The audience stayed with it, showing as much fortitude as the band, egging them on. The performance, and the film, lasts six hours. [Ragnar Kjartansson's](#) *A Lot of Sorrow* is a great ending. I'll have to go back. How long have you got?

● [Strange Days: Memories of the Future](#) is at the Store X, London until [9 December](#).