

REBECCA HASTINGS: *The Eternal Youths*

Brave New World is either a perfect-world utopia or its nasty opposite, a dystopia, depending on your point of view: its inhabitants are beautiful, serene, and free from diseases and worries, though in a way we like to think we would find unacceptable.

Margaret Atwood, 'Introduction', *Brave New World*, 2007¹

In Rebecca Hastings' latest series of paintings, seven identical, haloed youths present an ideal of ageless perfection, their cool imperturbability suggestive of bioengineered beings, empowered to transcend the merely human. Describing *The Eternal Youths* as 'a speculative investigation of the posthuman condition,' Hastings has shifted her attention from more subjective reflections on the nature of motherhood, to a contemplation of the future world her children might inhabit.

Inscribed on the chastely high-necked, pastel uniforms of these youthful deities, a layered lexicon of motifs acts as signifiers for Hastings' broader, post-certainty concerns which include (not exclusively) anthropogenic climate change²; the omnipotence of digital technology and ethical issues associated with genetic engineering. In a reference to our society's veneration of youth, other visual information – stigmata-like markings and distinguishing hand gestures – are allusions to religious iconography. Now acknowledged as essential to the survival of the planet's ecosystem, the honeybee, which is also capable of issuing a painful (occasionally fatal) sting, is like the syringe and drone, indicative of the artist's predilection for imagery that is open to multiple possible interpretations.

Inevitably these impassive clones of preternatural perfection – undisturbed by levitating objects that occupy a space between reality and imagination – engender a sense of unease. Masked by oversized eyewear, they refuse the gaze of the viewer, raising uncertainty about what might lie behind the opacity of the lenses (the platinum-haired children with 'the stare that threatens all mankind' from the 1960 film *The Village of the Damned* come to mind). However, Hastings indicates that the oversized lenses are intended to suggest a large-eyed aesthetic sentimentalised in art, as well as contemporary culture (the selfie), but adds that they are also reminiscent 'of the cold, disengaged stare of the insect, a creature, with whom we cannot connect empathetically.' She cites the example of the razorgirl character in William Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy (1984-'88), who possesses extensive cybernetic modifications, including 'implanted mirrored lenses covering her eyesockets, outfitted with added optical enhancements.'

Dual experiences – emblematic of the ‘mish-mash of contemporary pop culture and spiritual tradition’, the old/new binary which characterises modern Japan – inform the work in *The Eternal Youths*. Hastings’ visit in 2017 to Tokyo’s National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation³ provided a striking contrast to the journey she undertook to Osorezan – considered an entrance to the afterlife – in northern Japan. Sulphurous air suffuses a desolate, volcanic landscape of charred rocks and toxic pools, which is a sacred site of pilgrimage for the parents and relatives of deceased children, trapped in a Buddhist iteration of purgatory. For Hastings, this liminal state serves as a metaphor for the experience of her god-like eternal youths – fated to be forever suspended between life and death.

She poses the questions: ‘What loss of humanity will we suffer in living forever? Who will decide to which version of “perfect” we must subscribe? How will this *unnatural selection* influence our evolutionary path?’

Wendy Walker, October 2018

ENDNOTES

1. In Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), babies were grown in hatcheries and disseminated according to the needs of the population. The plot of Margaret Atwood’s similarly dystopian 1985 novel (set in a totalitarian near-future) is driven by a decline in fertility, brought about by environmental pollution. At the Women’s March on Washington – a day after Donald Trump’s inauguration – a protester was photographed carrying a placard with the slogan: ‘MAKE MARGARET ATWOOD FICTION AGAIN.’

2. See: Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016

3. Miraikin is a science museum, where Japan’s position at the forefront of robotic technology is showcased.

4. All unattributed quotes are from the artist’s unpublished exegesis ‘The Eternal Youths: Unnatural selection in the age of the Anthropocene’ and an interview with the writer in Adelaide on 20 September.