



Rachel Pimm interviewed  
by Paul Luckraft, 13 June 2014

most suited for an ever-changing environment, or frankly, just the organisms that manage to reproduce, with the idea of fitness comes a capitalist agenda, and with level competition in biology comes necessary extinction.

When I read Darwin, I find it hard not to read sociological or economic parallels, and I am engaging with irreversible changes to the material makeup of the world, and with the landscape of the plastisphere, which puts creating objects on par with genetic engineering. On a human scale I am interested in how our built environment changes, becomes hybridised, privatised and homogenised, and with that, how our behaviours have adapted.

**PL:** The hand-blown neon sculptures you are presenting, titled *Greenlight Avatars*, relate to the shape of the first commercially available glowing plant, the Starlight Avatar, as well as to the form of a 'designer' eco-friendly light bulb. Can you talk about your interest in the artificial manufacturing of light?

**RP:** 'Ecodesign' has been a buzzword for a decade or so, but in the last few years in my commercial work I noticed a shift towards it being slapped onto anything. But while it has become a cliché, there are a few notable examples that have been original and seem to go beyond copywriting into something more seminal or ideological, such as the Plumen 001 and the work of bioluminescence labs that developed the Starlight Avatar. The next phase of bioluminescence research aims to be more than merely decorative, and our streets might be lined with trees that glow, rather than streetlights in the near future. Then there's the glass itself – a material that can occur naturally, when lightning strikes sand, but has been really harnessed by man for a transparent surface to see through, to protect us from the elements and in instruments for scientific advancement.

One of the glassblowers I worked with during neon fabrication gave me a real appreciation of the material's relationship to nature; he described the neon tube as a man-made electrical storm, a kind of aurora borealis. This mimicry and manipulation of nature, a man-made object containing within it a natural phenomenon, whatever natural even means, really appealed to me.

**PL:** 'Greenwashing' – the use of eco-friendly PR by an organisation to cover up ecologically damaging actions – is a term you have referred to in your notes about this body of work. You don't make specific references to actual cases however. Is this because you want to avoid tying you your work too closely to a potentially reductive political standpoint?

**RP:** I am making work in other places which is perhaps a little more explicit, but I feel pretty aware that making art objects also implicates me heavily in wasting resources, so making work addressing this is somehow disingenuous. In the past I have re-used materials, for example shooting videos in trade exhibitions at night when they're closed to the public, after having worked on them. However for this work, I feel like I am performing greenwashing myself in order to enter the conversation. Sometimes artworks that play devil's advocate can be more effectively understood.

**PL:** What led you to make the plant *Ficus elastica* 'variegata' the object and subject of your new video *FYE-kuss e-LASS-tick-uh*?

**RP:** I had been screen-grabbing my desktop during sound edits, making images that looked like little Lego forests or variegated leaves, and a previous exhibition, *Recent Work by Artists*, featured a number of tropical plants decorating a co-working space; so it's a recurring character that has performed a few roles. I got attached to the markings on the leaves of some of them, which I

perceived as a similar visual appearance to those sound waveforms.

**PL:** You worked on a script for the video with horticulturist and artist Amanda Dennis. A couple of questions relating to this. Firstly, how important is collaboration to you as a method for making work, or even as an ethos? Second, language and its mutations and malleability seem central to *FYE-kuss e-LASS-tick-uh*. How do you use writing – either your own, or commissioned, or found – as part of communicating your ideas?

**RP:** I don't think of collaboration as a particularly unusual way of working as nothing is produced in a vacuum. I also like the process and the authority of the consulting of a specialist, and the kind of official language that carries with it new ideas. With Amanda, I had approached her to try and form a classification of houseplants, and her response – that they are somehow a different realm of botany to 'outdoor plants' – was a revelation; as if at room temperature, tropical plants are comatose, or a whole different species. This helped me articulate some of the ways I was linking technology and nature, onomatopoeic language and form as they mutate, breed, or hybridise. In other work, improvised method acting, quotation or language from advertising has also played a role to situate the text as part of a co-production of ideas. Putting words into the mouth of an actor in particular gives them a specialist quality.

**PL:** When I first came to your studio you talked about the influence of Joris-Karl Huysmans book 'Against Nature' of 1884. What in particular about this work fascinated you?

**RP:** Des Esseintes, the protagonist, was an aesthete, designing everything around him meticulously. As a novel, this led to real taste changes in the population of readers who wanted to emulate him – it

became a how-to-live guide. He is the original Ideal Home owner, and it is a text that helped complicate for me ideas around the desire for fakes in a productive way.

**PL:** You use Tumblr to give a very public and visible record of your research activity, and the things that have caught your eye. Looking over it provides a really immediate impression of the look and feel of things that attract you. Is this visible record of your interests made predominantly for you or for others?

**RP:** Tumblr is a really natural vehicle for me to keep a track of what I have seen. I think of it as a studio wall, as my workspace is more between my home and public spaces with wifi; like any typical freelancer. I make it for myself, but I am also aware of it being seen as a curated environment in a social media context. I don't feel too precious about ideas; many of mine are shared, plagiarised, or born out of group work and therefore the images aren't mine to protect. I also find it more useful in communicating how I work than having a portfolio. Making new work takes time but sharing images is an immediate way of communicating where I am. It's cheaper and easier than printing things, which I did prior to keeping a blog, and I feel less guilt over using paper. I suppose the energy used to store data for websites has a large impact too, but that's one of many contradictions.

**PL:** Alongside your work as an artist you also work in the design world, on consumer and trade shows such as The Ideal Home Show. There seems a very fluid overlap and cross-pollination between these two spheres of your activity?

**RP:** The Ideal Home Show is probably the single biggest influence on my work and their show houses have been a long term obsession. I think a lot of design shows, and the branding and marketing operations surrounding them are more ambitious and forward thinking

than many art exhibitions. They have rich archival history reaching back to the mid 1800s and world fairs where new materials, technologies and ways of living were showcased. The word exhibition really belonged to this world first. I would like to continue to have a practice that includes commercial work, because it has been a conscious decision to bridge these two contexts.

**PL:** Do you see your practice as engaging in a testing of borders of where an art object ends and a 'product', whether decorative or functional, might begin? And if so, does this emerge from a more general interest in seeing how the things you make might exist out there in the 'real world' – beyond the spaces and context of contemporary art – which, despite the flow of capital through it, is still a niche area.

**RP:** If the work I make can slide into someone's life seamlessly as well as be convincing in a gallery, I think I am going in the right direction.



**Paul Luckraft:** The title for your show *Natural Selection* comes of course from Darwin, but this term has also accrued over the years troubling layers of association, such as a 'survival of the fittest' ethos across economics and genetics. On what specific terms is your engagement with the term and its history?

**Rachel Pimm:** Firstly, I like that if you hadn't heard it before, the term could appear to be benign; just a selection of natural objects, which is on some level what it is. However, the Darwinian resonance of the name overpowers the descriptive meaning; the benign façade is easy to see through, as appearances often are. Though fittest means either the

#### Artist's presentation

Rachel Pimm: Sunday 10 August, 3pm.  
A live-streamed sound recording of Pimm's text work,  
*Bleisure Island: A Copy-Paste Screenplay*.

**Rachel Pimm:** (b. 1984 Harare, Zimbabwe, lives and works in London). Pimm received her BA from Central Saint Martins in 2006 and her MFA from Goldsmiths in 2013. Recent solo exhibitions include *Plants Under Glass*, Enclave Gallery, London, 2014 and *Tower Of Babble*, The Architecture Foundation, 2012.

Zabludowicz Collection Invites is dedicated to solo presentations by UK-based artists who do not currently have representation by a commercial gallery.

Reverse:  
*FYE-kuss e-LASS-tick-uh*, 2014, video still

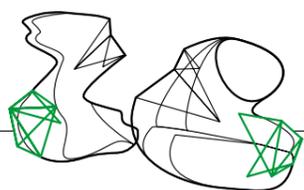
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