

TALLINN, ESTONIA

Katja Novitskova

KUMU ART MUSEUM

“If Only You Could See What I’ve Seen with Your Eyes. Stage 2.” is the first major institutional solo exhibition of Estonian artist Katja Novitskova in her home country. The show takes its title from a conversation between the replicant Roy Batty and designer and engineer Hannibal Chew in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982); machine vision is at the core of its thematic constellation. Originally created for and presented in the compact Estonian pavilion at last year’s Venice Biennale, the project has become more extensive and breathes more freely in nine spaces of the Kumu Art Museum. Walking from room to room is like roaming through a natural-history or science museum, although the distinction between nature and science becomes moot: There is no longer such a thing as a natural environment, because everything has been subject to scientific and technological manipulation.



Each room is an immersive environment featuring a mise-en-scène of various species—at once biological and machinic. Having steadily moved from the static image-sculptures for which she has previously been known toward kinetic and dynamic installations, here Novitskova created a synesthetic, almost theatrical experience. Cutout images of animals in each room are submerged in dramatic lighting, projections of digital renderings of human brains or world maps on the walls, and humming sounds. These cutouts are surrounded by flat, translucent “puddles” of clear PET plastic, reminiscent of drops of liquid samples in petri dishes seen through a microscope. Hanging and swinging from the ceiling, these bear imprints of various diagrams and texts, and cast shadows on the walls. Here, the artist has enlarged microscopic bodies of *C. elegans* roundworms—a model organism for research in developmental biology and neurology—to the same size as polar bears, chimpanzees, or leopards. By putting these species

Katja Novitskova,
Pattern of Activation
(*mamaRoo Nursery*
and *Dawn Chorus*),
2017, electronic baby
swings, aluminum
folding stands, lasers,
digital print, robotic
bugs, Swarovski
crystals, stress pills,
silicone stress eggs,
acrylic massagers,
animal-patterned
stickers, fossils,
tree mushrooms,
video projection,
and mixed media.
Installation view.
Photo: Tõnu Tunnel.

together, the artist shows how modernity has eroded the difference between captivity and freedom: The eye of technology monitors all the organisms, despite their location and scale. Captivity takes a new form and meaning—it no longer represents physical incarceration but rather soft invisible tentacles of tracking apparatuses. For science and capital, the body is not merely a physical unity, but a set of constantly shifting data.

This transformation of organic bodies into digital data is convincingly embodied in *Pattern of Activation* (mamaRoo Nursery and Dawn Chorus), 2017, with its eerie choreography of electronic rocking cradles standing in a circle around a halogen lamp that spins on its axis, shedding light on one machine at a time. The steady rhythm of its movement creates a sort of hypnotizing ritual in which wavy, plasmalike sheets of translucent polyurethane resin with digital renderings of protein molecules printed on them substitute for human babies in baskets. A video in the form of a slide show, featuring found images from NASA and pictures of various animal species and war-torn landscapes, joins the uncannily soothing rhythm. These strange baby-swinging machines resemble living hybrid organisms, postgender incubators of nonhuman offspring. It might dawn on you that you have just seen, with his eyes, what the replicant Roy Batty could have seen: a machine vision projected onto the outside world.

—*Neringa Černiauskaitė*