

Lyles & King

Estefania Puerta

False Positive

November 2–December 16

Opening Reception: Thursday, November 2nd 6–8PM

Text by Molly Zuckerman-Hartung

Lyles & King is pleased to present *False Positive*, an outdoor exhibition by Estefania Puerta. Opening November 2, 2023, the exhibition continues through December 16, 2023.

The title *False Positive* invokes events linked through misrecognition and belated identification, including Covid and pregnancy tests. “False Positives” is also a reference to the horrifyingly *intentional* misrecognition: the Colombian military’s practice of murdering impoverished men falsely identified as guerrilla insurgents *in order to meet high body count quotas issued by the government*.

Around 2017 I found a research paper about *Crush Porn* online, and for a few months I brought it up in every conversation. *Crush Porn* is a genre of porn in which women with high heeled-shoes crush insects for the visual and aural pleasure of men who unconsciously identify with the military machines — tanks, helicopters, AK-47s — modeled after the exoskeleton structures of insects. The men who are aroused by the crunching sounds of the exoskeletons experience an analog for their own hard-shell exteriors and their desire to be broken open like the insects ground under the sharp, fetishized shoes.

At stake here is identification (which always contains identification *with*, as well as othering.) Disgust and desire are the poles of Puerta’s ethno-scientific alchemy. Seduction and repulsion compel our bodies before we make conscious linguistic distinctions. *False Positive* is a phantasmatic remaking of a lost object in an attempt to exorcize the visceral into the semiotic — a transmutation of bodily thrums, purges and pulsations into form. In Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* it’s a “horrible vermin” with an “armor-like back” and in Clarice Lispector’s *The Passion According to G.H.*, the cockroach is identified by the narrator as female, “because whatever is female is split in two.” At stake is identification, and Puerta is troubling the violence of identification with the context-reliant structure of language, where meaning is discerned from what Jacques Derrida described as “the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other.”

At one level this is science-fiction — a familiar, even comforting genre, because genre is form, and form holds. In her 2011 book *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant described genre as a “communally held form of recognition” that “provides an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold...” and she described the contemporary experience of the *waning* of genre. Genre lives in our bodies, wires up our nervous systems, and surfaces in our involuntary, conditioned responses to fear and suspense, falling in love, or a laugh track.

“It is a mother, a hysteric, a comfort object, a menace, an exquisite corpse, a location.” Puerta wrote to me a few weeks ago. Psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas published an essay in 1987 introducing the concept of a *transformational object*—his term for the mother as an environment in which the infant’s growth takes place. The mother is experienced by the baby less as an object than as a *process* that is identified with internal and external transformation. This topos is subsequently sought in adult life through experiences

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of art or religion. Melanie Klein claimed that the infant imagines the contents of the breast as a wild phantasy cornucopia containing feces, the father's penis, and other children. For the infant, the breast is the source of all that is nourishing and good, and also a capricious menace which must be destroyed.

False Positive.

A signal does not necessarily mean that you want to be located or described. It can mean that you want to be known as Unlocatable and Hidden. (from "Bewilderment" By Fanny Howe)

A large table on steel legs (legs barely visible behind a yellowish-greenish tinted vitrine,) the sculpted surface is slanted as though rising to confront the viewer. (I picture the awakening of Frankenstein's monster here, but scouring clips of the 1931 Boris Karloff performance, and Mary Shelley's text, I cannot find a representation that fits my memory of the monster sitting up.) The courtyard is dimly lit by a glowing copper mollusk-lamp of articulated armor, hung on a long neck above a chrome industrial mid-century rolling stool. From the table protrudes a gridded order of eighteen mounds, each with a silicone nipple topping its peak, and interrupted by a single shimmering dark void. Nipples are ducts, conduits for life-sustaining fluid transmission, as well as erogenous zones. Secreted, belching, and erupting from the aluminum-plated topography are a congeries of haptic-symbolic objects, operating as both semiotic and mystical punctuation in a space between surgical scenario and landscape. A sensate creaturely orchid wends out, elegant tufts and sordid stamens proliferate. Misrecognition abounds. Horsehair becomes worm, or negative space. On this shiny reflective mirror, the sexual and symbolic change places, and languid yet empirical examination is demanded. The luminous acid-green display case beneath this profusion of sensorial hard surfaces shelters a sculpture—an uncannily smooth black and white dog-form sleeps, curled on the ground, dreaming, or hiding.