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Hayden Dunham Is the Art World's Mysterious New Ingénue

Twenty seven and already represented by Andrea Rosen, the emerging artist talks before her new exhibition at Red Bull Studios

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Photo by Mark Hartman

Tall, willowy, and exquisitely pale, Hayden Dunham gives the outward appearance of being more in command of her own body than any artist I have met (and I've spent time with Marina Abramovic). Last Thursday night, though, her internal monitor was going a little haywire.

The 27-year-old emerging star, who is the latest artist represented by respected dealer Andrea Rosen's gallery, had just returned from Australia, a 16-hour difference, and was working overtime to complete the installation of BIO:DIP, her dual exhibition with Nicolas Lobo at Red Bull Studios New York, which was due to open in less than 24 hours. Yet even the way she collapsed, exhausted, onto a couch in a back room out of sight of her unfinished work had an air of graceful control about it.

"Can I make you a drink?" she asked as she squeezed a few drops of chlorophyll into her bottle of water, before slowly fainting backwards onto the cushions as if out of Jane Austen. "It's helpful to keep nourishing."

Dunham's obsession with outside influences on our bodies, especially those that are unseen

or unrecognized, like the HVAC system in Red Bull Studios (which she rerouted so that its warm air washes over gallery visitors) is her central concern in BIO:DIP, which was curated by Neville Wakefield. In researching the exhibition, she visited power plants in China, the Blue Lagoon in Iceland, and a former polio hospital in Lulling, Texas, near her hometown of Austin. All of these are sites of interest because they represented what she calls "energetic hotspots": places where, respectively, steam is harnessed into energy, water is so oxygenated it can be used to treat a dangerous viral disease, and a man-made lagoon has the mineral content to be repurposed into a luxury spa. She even had the sewage and water systems at Red Bull analyzed (the verdict: a lot of fluoride).



Installation photos by Cameron R. Neilson. Courtesy of Red Bull Studios New York

“I don’t think organic bodies exist anymore,” Dunham said as she sipped her mossy green drink. This isn’t a neo-Thoreauvian political argument — she’s not troubled by the reality of artificial heart valves, saline implants, and the carcinogen C8, which is a byproduct of Teflon and traces of which run in the bloodstreams of 98 percent of Americans. “We’re way past Donna Haraway’s idea of the bionic body. I’m more interested in the body as a place for constant augmentation.”

In the subterranean space at Red Bull, Dunham has created her own energy hotspots, in the form of coolly impassive sculptures that upon closer examination come to life, like an enclosure from which a faucet drips inky black liquid that, as it pools, seems to exist somewhere between liquid and solid. An ice sculpture hanging beneath a staircase acts as its own filtration system as it melts. Everything is in transition—“a state of becoming,” as Dunham described it. This underlies one of her favorite ideas: that some things can have healing properties in one state, toxic ones in another.

“I coated the objects in this show with silica, in its liquid form,” she explained. “But in its powder form, it can be extremely dangerous—if you breathe it in, it can stay in your lung tissue. My grandfather was a geologist, and he became particularly ill.”

This was one of Dunham’s rare on-the-record admissions to a private life outside of her art. She protested any biographical reading of herself as an artist: “I don’t think talking about my past is that interesting.” This includes her time at New York University – she graduated from Gallatin, obviously – or her 2014 project QT, when she performed as a fake pop singer who was promoting a fake energy drink. (In that light, the Red Bull commission seems especially ironic.)

Rather, Dunham would prefer the chatter to revolve around her sculptures, which she feels give off energy in the same way that people do.

As we talked in the back room, she grew a little exasperated. “It’s hopeless to try to talk about them if you can’t feel them in here,” she said, getting up. “Language is really limited, you know?”