



Desiree Holman, still of *Troglodyte*, 2005, video, at Queen's Nails Annex, San Francisco.

## Desiree Holman at Queen's Nails Annex

In her newest body of work on view at Queen's Nails Annex, Desiree Holman conceives of, and joins in, a parallel primate existence. Titled *Troglodyte*—a creature belonging to a cave-dwelling community—the show features a family of “chimpanzees” (performed by Holman and others in furry latex chimp suits) whose bizarre, yet relatable, behavior is documented and dramatized into something somewhere between a PBS nature program and a 1980s music video.

Projected in the back gallery, the seven-minute video commences with a close-up of blinking hazel eyes and then pans out to reveal the latex chimp face. A congregation of crudely crafted chimps, each boasting exaggerated, ill-positioned reproductive organs, fills the frame. As the chimps gallivant around in nature, we hear the distant whistling of an approaching train and muffled talking and coughing, as if the camera microphone was inadvertently left on. As the train gains momentum, coming closer and closer, instrumental music starts to swell, and the chimps get riled. Spliced with B-roll footage of dense forests, mountains, rushing rivers and water-

instigated by the imminent danger to their habitat—and their response of fighting, mating and fleeing is real and readily translatable to human experience. According to Lera Boroditsky, a Stanford professor who wrote a playful, but informative essay to accompany Holman's exhibition, there's really just one major difference between chimps and humans. Humans possess the evolutionary ability to pass ideas on to each other, across centuries and continents, and tap into this cumulative knowledge base to explain and make predictions about the world. Chimps, on the other hand, come to life fresh with every generation.

Yet the information—and misinformation—that humans share and build upon through generations doesn't protect us from or ease our existential anxieties. The fear of death, the fear of losing a loved one, the fear of destruction to our homes, the fear of the unknown—these are primal triggers for humans as much as chimps and no amount of explanation or distraction can assuage them.

In the front gallery, sprinkled with leaves and sticks, the chimp costumes sit propped up on tree stumps. Uninhabited as they are, the costumes retain their form, evoking an unsettlingly familiar presence. Adorning the walls of their

psychological margin between human and chimp. In *Reciprocal Altruism*, the chimp family sits under a tree in the woods, arms around each other and holding baby chimps. *The Other* captures the profile of one chimp looking into a compact mirror and seeing his own image reflected. Significantly, chimpanzees are one of the very few primates other than humans to recognize their own reflection in a mirror. As for the five adult chimps so unapologetically smoking cigarettes in *Somethin' Ain't Right*, well, that's where evolution fails the chimp. They can't know from their parents and grandparents that smoking might kill them. But it seems this group of chimps is taking steps to overcome their handicap. In *Soothsaying*, three chimps squat before a deck of memory cards strategically laid out like tarot cards, as if a better, more generationally retentive, memory will lead to a better destiny.

Humans' ability to retain and learn from our history has meant that we possess more complex things—and explanations for things—than chimpanzees, but it's yet to be determined whether that ensures a better destiny. Indeed, we who have the ability to take heed of our missteps, and change our ways in order to protect our home and family and future generations, are the ones that do the most damage. We exploit our natural resources, harming an ecosystem that is as crucial to our existence as to the evolutionarily inferior animals. Perhaps it's more challenging to change direction midway than to learn it all anew time and again.

Humans and chimps differ in only 4 percent of our genetic makeup, and Holman's thoughtful and light-handed project suggests that if either is to become more like the other, it might better serve the world if humans backtracked toward chimp-likeness rather than chimps advancing toward human-likeness, if for no other reason than to prevent chimps from making music videos.