

# ARTFORUM

March 31, 2019



View of "Lex Brown," 2019. From left: *Sync*, 2019; *Animal Static* (detail), 2019; *New Codes*, 2019.

## [Lex Brown](#) [THE KITCHEN](#)

Lex Brown's exhibition "Animal Static" was a dizzying, attention-span-fraying fun house of irony and gloom—just like the internet. The projectors and spotlights in the exhibition were activated by spectators via motion-sensor technology (when you stepped back from a work, for instance, its sources of illumination immediately dimmed). And in the case of the comedic three-channel video that gave the show its title (all works 2019), the content progressively degenerated into stretches of visual and linguistic glitching.

*Animal Static* lays out sundry narratives that take on content producers, tragic addictions, and niche businesses built upon the flimsiest of premises—allegorical meditations on America that, though absurd, aren't *so* divorced from our current reality. On one wall, GIF-length clips made up a neo-western drama for smartphones titled *Elephant Hill*, featuring a tired-looking cowboy sipping a glass of cream. When I got closer to the work, Brown herself suddenly appeared as Melanie, a newscaster speaking in a clipped British accent, reporting on the death of *Elephant Hill*'s star Richard Jergens from an overdose of H4Qn2—street name, vanilla-bean dust. After Melanie snorts some herself, she and Jergens swirl against the cosmos. A second video projection rotated between clips of a novelty dessert concept, a beauty guru, and a dystopian content-exchange bank. The artisanal sweets shop Ice + Cream is hyped by "Craig from Evian" (the New York-based artist Marcel Alcalá), who delivers an apathetic, half-assed tagline: "For those of you who are lactose intolerant, sorry about it. Buy a corgi, save the world, at Ice + Water." Fresh-faced influencer Orange Blossom, with her close-cropped hair and John Lennon glasses, at first seems to be an antidote to the cosmetic industry's narcissistic twenty-step skin routines. ("Maybe laziness is kind of beautiful," she intones with a shrug.) But Ms. Blossom is no slacker

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throwback—at one point, she pauses to conduct a real-estate deal on her phone while breezily instructing her fans to buy up buildings. Finally, at a bank where online content is exchanged for money, a teller advises a customer that the character Brioche (pronounced *Bri-oh-SHEE*), played by Brown, “doesn’t have any liquidity in this neighborhood.” His polite euphemism is a racist acknowledgment of her blackness.

Brown’s subject is the attention economy, and her project invites comparisons to post-internet artists such as Ryan Trecartin. But she is eight years younger than Trecartin (who is thirty-eight), and this difference is made clear by her suspicion of the internet’s frictionless transactional qualities. Her video is built from character sketches that seem partly improvised—a marked contrast to Trecartin’s precise, rapid-fire editing and dialogue. In some of *Animal Static*’s scenes, the actors stumble over their lines and giggle, while at other moments, Brown deploys silence to dramatic effect. The director of the content bank intones, “The killing of black and brown people has to stop,” before the rest of his sentence is censored by a bleep. His voice then fades back in as he bursts into maniacal laughter.

Four large-scale drawings in colored pencil and crayon also resisted easy legibility. In each work, Brown renders text in the middle of colored grids that seem designed to stump a bot on a captcha test. The lightly penciled-in phrases, collisions of slang and blunt observation, go from psychoanalytic to weirdly poetic. In *Time String*, musings on depression are followed by the platitude IT BE LIKE THAT SOMETIME. The text continues with a proclamation of black negativity, updated for the era of digital labor: SLAVERY: IT CAN HAPPEN TO / ANYONE. NOW OR LATER OR / ANYTIME COMES A FEEBLE ATTEMPT / AT MANUAL OVERRIDE OF THE / SYSTEM.

— [Wendy Vogel](#)