

JONATHAN MONAGHAN: *The Disco Beast*

by Alex A. Jones

Jonathan Monaghan's solo show at Bitforms gallery investigates the unicorn as a symbolic being, demonstrating in surprising ways its historical richness, multivalence, and relevance to the digital age. The exhibition's namesake work is an animated video in which a unicorn traverses a deserted landscape of opulently rendered, futuristic luxury environments. Propelled by twin jet engines that emerge from its back, the unicorn descends from the sky into a sterile mall-like development where all is glassy and devoid of human presence. It rides up an escalator into an empty plaza and is suddenly captured by a shape-shifting machine. Trapped within an electromagnetic bubble, the unicorn is held captive inside a decadent, Silicon-Valley-Baroque lobby. Finally, its seemingly dead body emerges from the floor of a disco-themed Starbucks bathroom. To the beat of pulsing electronic music, it rises again and walks solemnly past the café counter to a balcony high in the clouds, taking flight into the sky.

The immediate association of this surreal sequence is the story of flight, capture, and rebirth from the the Cloisters museum's beloved Unicorn Tapestries. The medieval unicorn hunt depicted in these seven weavings, which have strongly influenced the canonization of the unicorn in the western imagination, is a magnum opus of luxurious detail. In Monaghan's hyper-detailed animated architectures there is a similar—or, at least, aspirationally similar—sense of intensive, fastidious labor. A second, more contemporary association I can't help making is triggered by the virtual Starbucks, which here recalls the coffee chain's "limited-time-only" Unicorn Frappuccino, a hideous color-changing 'blended crème' drink that was released earlier this year. With this concoction, Starbucks slapped its mark of hyper-commercial uncoolness upon the whimsical #unicorn trend that had been saturating mainstream social networks with rainbow hair, rainbow food, holographic cosmetics, and an abundance of glitter.

With these references to the unicorn motif, both iconic and trivial, Monaghan seems to invite a transhistorical consideration of its symbolism. Situated within the animated environment, the unicorn has the potential to embody the blurring boundaries of the "real" in the digital age; does the imaginary animal in virtual space become virtually real? It's possible that the internet gives the unicorn more potency than ever. Years before Monaghan's show, it emerged as a significant motif in internet culture, spawning with the My Little



Jonathan Monaghan, *The Unicorn in Bondage*, 2017.
Carrara marble, 3D printed steel. 27 × 13.5 × 15 inches.
Courtesy bitforms gallery, New York. Photo: John Berens.

Pony franchise and the viral meme “Charlie the Unicorn.” But its continuing popularity seems to stem deeply from millennial childhood nostalgia, and from its unabashed whimsy that so aptly embodies the absurdist humor and escapism of the internet. What’s compelling about Monaghan’s work is that his unicorn is a creature whose existence is predicated on the symbolic continuum of past and present.

The artist’s narrative parallel to the medieval unicorn hunt is amplified into the present with a tiny sculpture of a porcelain unicorn corralled within a golden enclosure. Upon close inspection, the gilded barrier is actually a ring of 3D-printed baggage x-ray machines. The unicorn has always been an elusive object of desire that some, as the Cloisters tapestries demonstrate, will inevitably try to find and seize. It remains a prize to covet within the contemporary reality evoked by Monaghan’s golden x-rays, one in which militarized and commodified surveillance is crucially abetted by the tech industry; in venture capital lingo, a “unicorn” is a private company valued at over a billion dollars.



A standout sculpture is the *Unicorn in Bondage* (2017), a marble form resembling a marble form resembling an upholstered phallus with a delicate gold horn protruding from its top. Compared to the flat, cold, digital textures of Monaghan’s animated environments,

there’s something intensely sensual about this object. Though it remains rooted in new media techniques—it was carved by a CNC machine based on a 3D model—the artist hand-finished the Carrara marble to remove the tell-tale scour marks of the digital chisel. The resulting topography of the sculpture’s button-tufted surface is downright fleshy. It’s an erotic form, again reflecting the beast’s symbolic character; medieval unicorns were, after all, supposedly lured into capture only by the exposed breasts of virgins. Also, there’s there’s no denying the state of arousal evoked by its singular horn, or the ongoing fetishization of the unicorn in internet culture, if one cares to look for it. Monaghan’s cushiony suggestion seems loyal to, even protective of, this erotic persona—keep it safe, keep it sexy.

The last sculpture in the show is a wall-mounted medallion emblazoned with the Starbucks logo, flipped upside down and painted black, with lustrous, carnal-looking faux fur protruding from it. To me it looks like a funky satanic inversion of the ubiquitous icon of commerce. If the *Unicorn in Bondage* is a gesture of protection, then perhaps this is one of refusal, a black-magic hex against the commercial degradation of our vital symbols. And a message to the disco beast, maybe, that it’s time to retreat once more into the obscure forest, this time online, where it will hide but remain unassailably real.

Jonathan Monaghan, *Pumpkin Spice*, 2017.

Powder-coated steel, faux fur, MDF. 42 × 42 × 1.5 inches.

Courtesy bitforms gallery, New York. Photo: John Berens.