

ARTFORUM

Ian Cheng

FONDAZIONE SANDRETTO RE REBAUDENGO

Via Modane, 16

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A “smart story” is how Ian Cheng describes *Emissary in the Squat of Gods*, 2015, the latest of his live simulations and the centerpiece of this exhibition. Neither a movie nor a video game, yet partaking of both, this never-ending auto-generative animation indebted to Japanese film director and manga artist Hayao Miyazaki is smart in more ways than one: It combines artificial intelligence with a slick presentation.

Placed aslant in relation to the wall on which the two-channel simulation is projected, a large white podium, whose single step viewers can sit on, bears the twin projectors, speakers, and cables. Two screens of different sizes, displayed side by side, present the same ecosystem, characters, and story from two vantage points:

The large one offers a bird’s-eye view of a proto-community faced with the constant threat of an active volcano, while the small one zooms in on certain areas of this desolate landscape—its dusky violet backdrop conjuring volcanic ash and the dawn of time—and privileges particular story strands, such as the rise of consciousness of the eponymous emissary.

Consciousness does not exist in isolation or independently of language. In this fable of origins illustrating the inherently social nature of consciousness, the first faltering steps toward the acquisition of verbal communication made by our distant forebears are vividly portrayed, both visually (in the shape of white runic characters signposted here and there or gliding along the screen in clusters) and orally (as anguished monosyllabic utterances growing in complexity).

— Agnieszka Gratza



View of “Ian Cheng,” 2015.

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