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Intimacy and cold salesmanship fill this sculpture exploring the process of selecting sperm donors

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French artist Anne Le Troter's exhibition at the Nasher portrays cheerful but chilly moments.

By Darryl Ratcliff



French artist Anne Le Troter has a sound installation at the Nasher Sculpture Center based on recordings related to sperm donors. (Nan Coulter/Special Contributor)

French artist Anne Le Troter was waiting for her plane to take off when a passenger in the next seat spilled wine on her.

This led to a conversation, and it turned out the passenger, a woman, worked at a sperm bank. She started explaining to Le Troter that a client could pick everything she wanted from a donor — from his eye color to his astrological sign. Le Troter became intrigued and started listening to more than 400 donor recordings from various U.S. sperm banks. These recordings became the crux of Le Troter's latest site-specific sound sculpture, currently on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center.

"I was deeply moved by listening to what they liked and what they don't like, and it was so intimate," Le Troter says.

There is a disembodied nature to listening to the cacophony of voices while knowing the purpose of the text. It is an advertisement for sperm donors, or rather of sperm donors. The initial intended audience was not museumgoers but women deciding whose sperm to use to create a new life. In some ways, it is both effortlessly beautiful but also capitalism run amok.



The sound installation "Sightings: Anne Le Troter" runs through Feb. 2 at the Nasher Sculpture Center. (Nan Coulter/Special Contributor)

The room itself is a cross between a doctor's waiting room, an urban park and a record store listening room. The pink carpet was scrubbed by the artist with bleach, mimicking the process of the cryobank scrubbing the profiles of its donors — turning them from people into persona. On the walls are childhood pictures that donors provide of themselves. The cryobank works hard to not sell sperm but to sell characters — to sell the idea of life itself. In fact, the language of work is often used as a superlative in the donor interviews. "Highly educated, hardworking, stays busy with work" plays from Le Troter's installation.

An interest in audio recording came early to Le Troter. Her mother was a radiologist with a specialty in breast cancer. "I grew up watching my mother dictate into the machine, and as she does that she puts her lips to the machine almost as if she was kissing it," Le Troter says. The intimacy between the body, words and recordings is a through line in Le Troter's work.

It is uncanny to hear about how a sperm donor is trying to be the best version of himself or aspiring to have a positive impact on many people. There is a deconstruction of what these platitudes normally mean when juxtaposed with the artificial creation of new life — particularly because in most cases, these donors will never meet their potential child or even be notified if one is created.

The plastic covering the floor carpet is a cruel trick reminding the viewer of cellophane or a condom. It is as if you might get pregnant just from staying too long in this exhibit.

These donors exist as virtual fantasies, and what Troter does with splicing the texts mirrors the process of artificial insemination — she takes the disparate and creates a new whole. There is a particular sequence — where she splices the sound of a male scoff after female voices read particularly glowing reviews of the donor characteristics — that is truly poetic.

Surprisingly, one doesn't hear much from the male donor voices themselves; female voices describing the donors significantly outnumber commentary from the men. This is a shame, because there is a shaky, bashful, almost introspective quality in the tone of the male voices. One can imagine the immense task of not only donating sperm but also advertising why it would be superior to other sperm. And in this way, this piece by Le Troter seems to critique or highlight female desires and agency more so than that of males. Particularly, Le Troter highlights how something as unsexy as anonymous, frozen gunk is marketed to women in the same way as shampoo, bras, sedans and cereals.

Also, by choosing this pastiche of voices, Le Troter reiterates the number of people involved in this vein of life creation. Unlike the slapdash manner in which life can sometimes be created, there is an intentionality, a process, a rhythm to the sperm donor process. It is cheerful, yet cold.

Le Troter has achieved with her installation something similar to what the poet and artist Kenneth Goldsmith achieves with his uncreative writing. Le Troter proves that she isn't just an artist but is also a conceptual poet whose installation exposes both the beauty and the contradictions of something we thought we knew but had not fully examined.