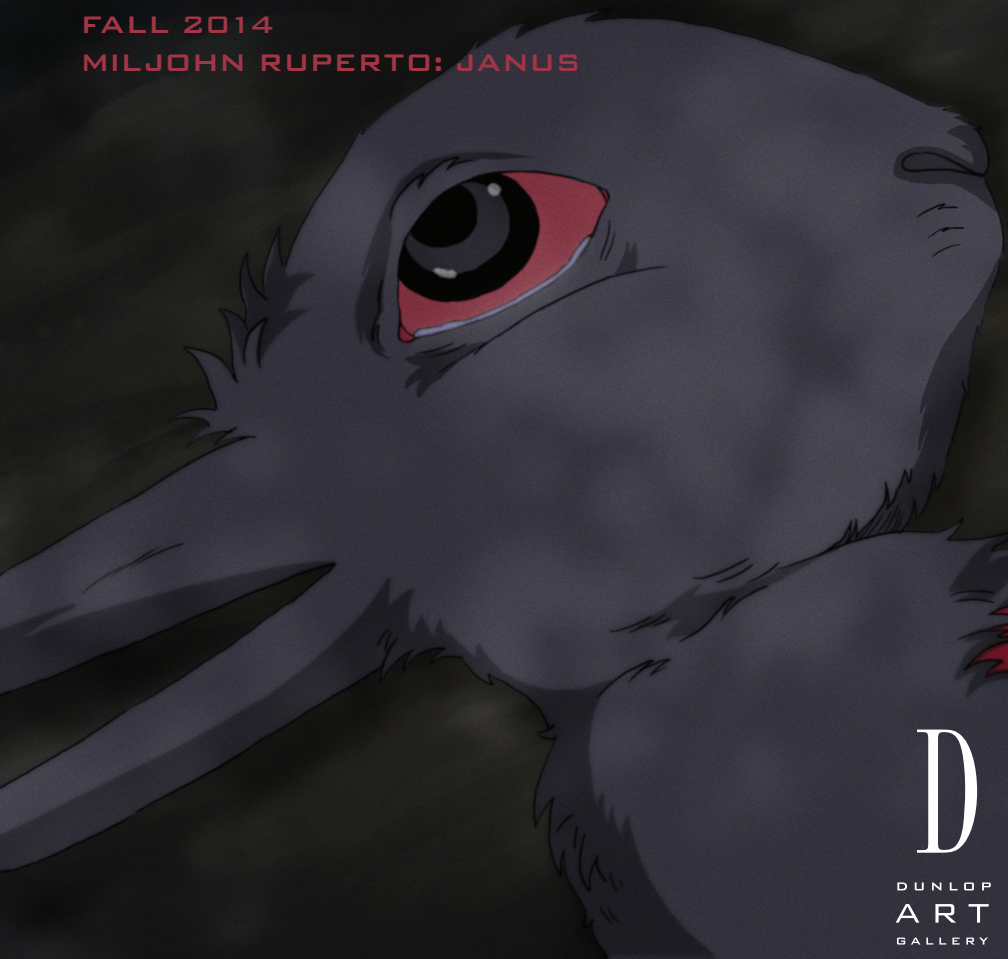


FALL 2014

MILJOHN RUPERTO: JANUS



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Miljohn Ruperto: Janus

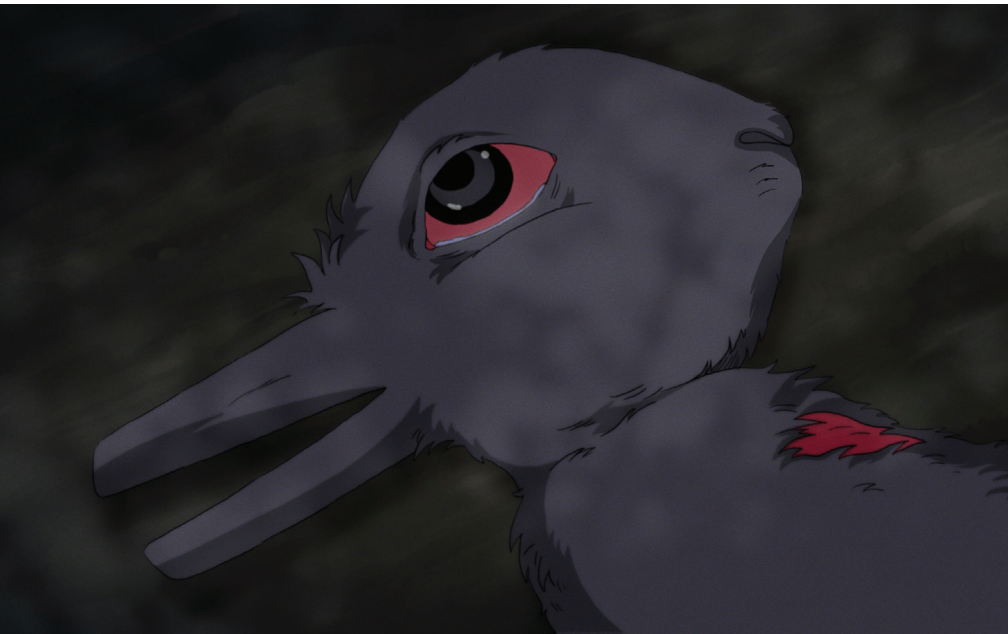
Curated by Jennifer Matotek, Director/Curator

AUGUST 28 TO NOVEMBER 13, 2014

SEEING THAT/SEEING AS

by Jennifer Matotek, Director/Curator

The protagonist of Miljohn Ruperto's video *Janus* is a creature animated by Aimée de Jongh – the well-recognized “duck-rabbit” illustration popularized by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In the 1953 text *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein introduces the illustration to explain a certain phenomenon of looking and comprehending. He characterized the experience of seeing an ambiguous picture, which could be determined via language and experience to be one thing (ie. a duck), but also recognized as another (ie. a rabbit) as “the dawning of” or “noticing an aspect.”¹ Although Wittgenstein doesn't explicitly characterize it as such, that moment of perception (“seeing that/seeing as”) – to recognize that the image before you has utterly transformed before your eyes, from one thing to another, without materially changing – can be magical and bewitching.



Janus is utterly hypnotic. In the video, the ambiguous animal inhales and exhales, occasionally shudders as if to cough. Its large red eye widens, blinks and weeps. Its features twitch. A wound on the back/front of its torso widens and narrows with each breath, and an opening on the back/front of its head gapes occasionally, releasing minuscule drops or strings of moisture and a flash of pink.

The ancient god Janus – visually represented with a bifrontal two-face, like the reversible rabbit duck – has been characterized by Roman scholars as the deity of entrances and exits. His duality has held profound symbolism for story-tellers, cosmologists and philosophers, who have posited Janus as a figure who could see both the past and the future; sometimes embodied not simply as a doorway, but as a bridge, passageway or personified as a “mediating figure” – a kind of translator or facilitator of two-way communication.²

To personify, while occupying, liminal, transitional space is an oxymoron. How can it be? Wittgenstein argued in his use of the rabbit-duck illustration that an ambiguous, unresolved picture with two interpretations cannot be simultaneously viewed and reconciled by the human mind. The loop of Ruperto’s video forces the viewer to continually toggle their interpretations unendingly, with the wound on the animal serving as transitional perceptual cue.

Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit may be focused on the mind, but the rabbit-duck of Ruperto's *Janus*, brought to life via animation, is focused on the body. The most compelling question in Ruperto's work is not whether the animal is a duck or a rabbit, but whether it is alive and sleeping or dying. The creature continues to exist in the liminal space between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness. Reveling in the strangeness of human perception, the viewer can never hold one singular definition of the image for long, after it has already seen and understood the other.

Using semiotics while simultaneously stripping them away to only leave the body, *Janus* may propose that life and death, like perception, move in an infinite loop. The body cannot live forever, just as an ever-changing ambiguous image cannot be fixed.

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1958), 212.

² Rabun Taylor, "Watching the Skies: Janus, Auspication, and the Shrine in the Roman Forum," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* vol. 45 (2000), 1-40.

Artist Biography

Miljohn Ruperto was born in 1971 in Manila, Philippines, and lives and works in Los Angeles.

CREDITS

MILJOHN RUPERTO, *Janus*, 2013, detail, digital animation, 3:30. Image courtesy of the artist and Koenig & Clinton, New York

MILJOHN RUPERTO, *Janus*, 2013, digital animation, 3:30. Image courtesy of the artist and Koenig & Clinton, New York



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