

We're Leaving Together: On Macha Suzuki's "Anthem for the End"

When the band Europe debuted The Final Countdown, their buoyantly apocalyptic anthem with synth trills, it was 1986 and the beginning of the end of their hair metal strangeness. Their lead guitarist, John Norum, would soon leave, saying they'd become a "teeny-bopper, bubble-gum band" and that he didn't really care for "the spandex, poodle-rock type of thing." While the band would have one more well-received album before taking a decade-long hiatus, The Final Countdown remained what everyone knew them for, although Blender magazine called it "the worst thing to come from both the band and the continent itself," while Rolling Stone called it "incredibly annoying." The song, a goodbye to earth from a narrator who may never return, is the soundtrack for Macha Suzuki's exhibition, and perhaps an appropriate theme song for his practice: a hit that allows optimism and anxiety to coexist fairly peacefully.

The wooden marimba Suzuki sculpted for "Anthem for the End" is specially optimized, the keys made to play only the notes needed ("It's the final countdown / the final countdown...") and the skills to craft and tune those keys acquired via trial, error, and online tutorials. The instrument rests on a vintage pew, salvaged from a local church undergoing renovation. The pew, formerly brown and orange, is now black and white, with skulls, drawn with the paracord that holds the bars, on either side and black pipes coming down from beneath the all-white upholstery into which Suzuki has embedded the keys. This is Our Prayer, Suzuki titled it, referencing reverence, but ambiguously. What exactly is our prayer? That we'll get out of here alive, head to outer space? That this is the end of the world as we know it, and something new is on its way? Or that we'll simply allow ourselves to revel in what we have — which includes anthemic kitschiness and clever craftsmanship — while it lasts?

In the aftermath of the recent election, the word "end" hangs in the air, comically and seriously. It appears in dystopian Saturday Night Live Skits (Hillary Clinton telling an electoral college voter that, "We're all going to die.") It appears frequently on protest signs, and in op-eds about the future of both sides of our two party system. The journal Contemporary Art Review Los Angeles put it on the cover of its first issue of the year. Suzuki knew this when he chose to make his own prayer instrument, and give his show an ominous title, but his work has been associated with current events often before. In her ArtForum review,

Annie Buckley framed "Permission to Fail," his 2010 show at Sam Lee Gallery, in terms of the "recent collapse of global financial markets," suggesting his use of accessible materials and celebration of process over product was "more humane" than the "hyperreal success idolized by capitalism."

Two years later, in a review of Suzuki's show at the Laguna Beach Museum of Art, Dave Barton of the Orange County Register recommended the Republican Party learn from the artist: after "Mitt Romney's epic failed run for the presidency," he wrote, and as "blame rips apart the GOP," Republicans would do well to adopt Suzuki's philosophy and embrace failure not as "an end, but a gateway." The tendency to read Suzuki's work as remedy or salve for certain political realities perhaps speaks, more than anything else, to a desire for an all-encompassing attitude shift.

One of the works included in his show in Laguna, a video triptych called The Last Sunset Again, reappears in "Anthem for the End." Each of the three videos, installed on wall-mounted monitors, shows a letter propped up against a hill, the San Gabriel Mountains visible in the background. Suzuki built this hill -- actually a miniature -- and the letters, so that through the camera lens they resemble the letters in the Hollywood sign: dramatic and imposing. The sun sets behind each letter, and then, given the shortness of the loop, sets again.

Suzuki made this triptych for his Laguna show in part because the exhibition would open before the date for the end of the world on the Mayan calendar -- December 21, 2012 -- and then continue on past that date. "As you know, the world is going to end on the 21st of December," Suzuki said in an interview with his friend, artist Devon Tsuno, published in the exhibition brochure. "That's a fact (with tongue in cheek). And then darkness will follow." Alternatively, Suzuki also suggested, the end would be the start of something new.

Many artists have experimented with end narratives -- Jack Pierson did so recently in his 2013 exhibition at Regen Projects, filling the entire main gallery with the letters E, N, D -- and have approached material in a way similar to Suzuki. Marcel Broodthaers' topographic, wall-hanging sculptures could easily be forerunners, and Martin Kippenberger's installations have a similar palette. But because Suzuki does not quote art history in an overt way, and because the work has a humorous, present quality, it conjures more easily pop cultural, musical and literary references, such as Emily St. John Mandel's 2014

novel, Station 11. In the novel, the world has more or less ended. A flu wiped out so much of civilization and caused so much infrastructural devastation, that survivors now live in primitive communes, defending what little they have with arrows and knives instead of guns. The main protagonist belongs to The Traveling Symphony, a group of caravanning musicians who go around their North American territory in horse drawn wagons, performing for the communities they encounter. "Because survival is insufficient," reads text painted on the leading wagon. The symphony exists, in this world in which people are starting over, to keep color, music, monologues, and costumes part of their lives. In its materiality and sound, Suzuki's musical pew makes related overtures: if the world is ending, or failing, then let's see it in with prog rock in the sanctuary, pop culture and spirituality over austerity.

Alongside this interest in endings, Suzuki has pursued over the past decade an interest in failure. Outside the galleries, installed in the yard, is Suzuki's steel leaning, human-sized letter "F," coated in solid pink. F stands for failure, the simplicity and obviousness of this key to the work's content. Failure becomes a point of pride, like a letter on a school sports field or on a hill to celebrate a town's identity. The F has appeared in Suzuki's exhibitions before, backlit on a wall, or as a pool amidst fake grass and shrubbery where sheep drink (nourished by an f-shaped lake).

In the realm of thought, failure makes living possible, philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer suggested when he wrote The Failure of Philosophy in the early 1890s:

If we had this perfect, this all embracing, metaphysical insight, should we be capable of any physical insight at all, or of going about our proper business? Nay, it might plunge us forever into a state of chill horror, like that of one who has seen a ghost.

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Perfection, in other words, is undesirable and success, too, may be a misguided goal, one that forces us to ignore the messiness and fallibility of daily life, and possibly also overlook our own mortality. "My dear sir, if we wrangle with Nature, we

are usually in the wrong," the philosopher also wrote before discussing the fleeting qualities of human life. Does claiming our failure allow us more honest insight into that fleetingness? Certainly, it allows for different insight.

Another standalone sculpture in Suzuki's current show, Verdugo, shows the imaginary underside of the Verdugo mountain range. The mountain has been installed upside down on a simple sky-blue stand. What one sees when looking down at it is layers of pink wood, stacked. The effect is comical. Suggesting that a mountain's insides would be fleshy and pink, like what's beneath human skin, and that ages-old sediment might be reconstructed like a puzzle, has something of a reverse effect. It emphasizes through its physical simplicity just how difficult it is to comprehend, let alone recreate, nature's vastness. Like so many of Suzuki's sculptures, it also exudes confidence in its limitations and ambitions. The work strives to capture and pay homage to something dramatic -- an imposing SoCal mountain range -- but in its execution it is already okay with the impossibility of this goal.

At the end of Lars von Trier's 2011 movie Melancholia, a mysterious planet catapults towards earth and two sisters argue about how to spend their final moments. The younger sister wins out, and they sit inside a teepee made of sticks holding hands, looking anguished. The soundtrack, from Wagner's Tristan und Isolde, feels mournful. Had the soundtrack instead been Final Countdown, Europe's and Suzuki's end-of-times anthem, and the setting made up of objects honed by someone who cares about craft but doesn't believe in human perfection, it would have, of course, been an entirely different movie. But it would have allowed hopefulness to accompany calamity.

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This is Our Prayer, Mixed Media, 60.5" x 34" x 32," 2017

THIS IS THE END



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Cover: Verdugo Mountains, Mixed Media, 90" x 30" x 43", 2016
Inside Fold: This is the End, Spray Paint on Digital Print, 24" x 18", 2015
Back: Permission to Fail, Mixed Media, 90" x 116" x 20", 2010

ANTHEM
(FOR THE END)
MACHA SUZUKI