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CIRCA

by

Evan Michael McLaughlin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Art in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2015

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Laurel Farrin

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

_____

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Evan Michael McLaughlin

has been approved by the Examining Committee for
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree
in Art at the May 2015 graduation.

Thesis Committee: _____
Laurel Farrin, Thesis Supervisor

_____
John Dilg

_____
Robert Glasgow

_____
Sue Hettmansperger

To Mom, Dad, Dan, Lisa, and Phil

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

My work examines themes of virtual habitation with a core emphasis on the subject of video games. The work is influenced by three primary sources. The first is from the everyday. I befriend gamers and observe their behavior. In this regard I maintain direct social contact with the gaming community. The second source follows advances in technology. These include aesthetic shifts in graphics, consoles, and interfaces. The last takes from personal interaction. I login to games and make note of what I find beautiful, problematic, and absurd.

Reference points then transition to a studio response. I create drawings, paintings, and sculptures that reflect poetically on human transitions into virtual space. The images rely on the impression of tight geometric control. Closer examination pivots those first takes toward playful disarray. This tension between clarity and ambiguity forces the viewer to reconcile their interpretation of the game content. The resulting context opens a door for the audience to interpret the present as seen through the lens of the work, and attempt to gauge the future.

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Artist Statement

We are all witnesses to the technological spring of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. An Information Age that is defined by habitation of digital space. Magnified further, change is the name of the game within this new frontier. The impact exposes culture as directed by waves of evolving devices. If the world isn't at our fingertips yet, it should be here any second.

Interpretations of this rapidity undoubtedly vary. Perceptions oscillate between optimism and skepticism, and provoke debates. Where are these innovations leading us? What are we sacrificing for the sake of progress? How are we constructing identity in such a transparent environment? Similar to precedents of industrialization, answers stumble miles behind the pace of progress yielding a familiar tension of uncertainty.

In no other context of the digital domain do technological struggles with idealism appear more captivating than within the trajectory of video games. Electronic entertainment began in the realm of toys. The content relied on fantasies, primarily of the masculine variety, to entrance young minds. Standard narratives featured violence, power, and conquest. Goals revolved around A to B travel by any means necessary. Today that content has grown to mass appeal. With virtual reality on the horizon, the relevance of these spaces looms. Will games continue as escapist entertainment? Or will they blossom into something more. A creative utopia where anything is possible? A tool used by the news media? A veil applied to detach us from nature? For me, speculation of these scenarios inspires the impulse for creative response.

My work begins with analysis of human transitions into video game space. I extract references from three basic sources. The first takes from the everyday. I befriend gamers and observe their behavior. In this way I can wake up in the morning, fix a bowl

of cereal, and watch in bewilderment as a friend simulates murder. The second source follows advances in technology. These include aesthetic shifts in consoles, graphics, and interfaces. The last inspiration point draws from personal interaction. I login to games, some populated by as many as 10 million users, and bask in the absurdity of faceless contact.

Observations then transition to the studio. The goal shifts to creating images that articulate a poetic response. Interplays between familiar and unfamiliar serve as the umbrella. I create rooms populated by objects that initially communicate tight geometric control. A closer look pivots those first impressions toward playful disarray. Some motifs rely on the iconic: a pixel, a code, and a game of pong reoccur. These elements float within grids and flat fields skewed by bizarre perspective and saturated by 8-bit color. Unforeseeable components are then applied to sabotage that legibility. I invent hybrid forms, functionless machines, and narrative hints that hang open. For the audience, this ambiguity should force more questions than answers. The resulting confliction opens a door for the viewer to subjectively reflect on the present as seen through the lens of the work, and seek to gauge the future.