

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: WE'RE PLASTIC, BUT WE STILL HAVE FUN.
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"We're plastic, but we still have fun" navigates the slippery divide between reality and fiction, icon and corporate logo, and commercialism and contemporary art. A 3D animation and a large plastic Target sign make up an exhibition composed of subject matter that is as iconic as it is wide-ranging. Mythical animals, medical devices, corporate logos, Gothic architecture, Pixar, and heraldry conflate into an absurd vision seemingly from alternate reality which is both familiar and alien; playing with our desires, dreams and anxiety.

WE'RE PLASTIC, BUT WE STILL HAVE FUN.

By

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Chapter 1: Intro

“Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world...”

(McLuhan 46)

— Marshall McLuhan, Canadian media ecologist

Technology is not a neutral player; it shapes our perceptions of reality, history, and identity. My work deals with these distorted perceptions by appropriating a wide-range of iconic subject matter. I conflate antiquated references from Western culture such as eagles, lions, coats of arms, Gothic architecture and crowns, with elements from a modern commercial, plastic environment, such as Target logos and medical devices.

I feel the most effective way to enter a dialogue with these notions is to make work using digital media technology, specifically 3D computer graphics. The techniques I use, and many times the exact same computer software, are the tools of video games, most commercials on television, Hollywood special effects, animated television shows, animated films, and host of other uses. These media are increasingly more prevalent, more pervasive and are arguably influencing the way we perceive the world and ourselves. By using those very same techniques I hope my work can help gain an understanding of how our past and our present culture is mediated through digital technology.

Chapter 2: Its The Real Thing.

“It's The Real Thing. Period. Coke. Period. In Helvetica. Period. Any questions? Of course not. Drink Coke. Period.”

— Michael Bierut, graphic designer

There is no direct art historical precedent for my work. That is to say my work does not have a fine-art lineage to be consciousness of as would a painter, sculptor, photographer and even video artist, rather I take all these histories into account. Furthermore I am deeply interested in these artistic histories as they relate to Western history and identity. I frequently reference art of institutional power from Western history, such as Gothic Cathedrals, Dutch still life paintings, royal heraldic symbols and patterns, crowns, etc. I conflate this imagery with references from commercial culture, such as Coca Cola commercials and Target logos.

For instance my 3D animation "Life Tastes Good", an important precedent to the work in the show, takes a cryptic turn on the popular Coke slogan as a 3D animated polar bear dies a slow, tragic, Shakespearian death over three painful minutes. The Polar Bear, once part of a ubiquitous, wildly successful, and utterly inescapable Coca-Cola marketing campaign, now takes on a new popularity as a symbol

of climate change. By re-creating Planet Earth footage of a starving Polar Bear in 3D software, tattooed with the wave from Coca Cola logos, I am mixing these two histories into a new vision, effectively blurring the line between a commercialized fiction and an impending reality, while also engaging in a symbolic dialogue about vulnerability and commercialism.

The Polar Bear is crowned, giving the character a strange layer of other-worldliness; regal yet vulnerable, familiar yet alien. This is a characteristic that is very important to all my work. I am attempting to create a new reality, a new world, one that we can use to help mediate and maybe figure out our own. This idea is expanded more broadly in the animated film “Dauphin 007”, which is the primary work in this thesis exhibition.

Chapter 3: Mythical Medical Devices

“This kind of acceleration by inertia this exponentiality of extreme phenomena, produces a new kind of event: now we encounter strange, altered, random, and chaotic events that Historical Reason no longer recognizes as its own. Even if, by analogy with past events, we think we recognize them, they no longer have the same meaning. The same incidents (wars, ethnic conflicts, nationalisms, the unification of Europe) do not have the same meaning when they arise as the millennium part of a history in progress as they do in the context of a history in decline. Now, we find ourselves in a vanishing history, and that is why they appear as ghost events to us.” (Baudrillard 94)

— Jean Baudrillard, French philosopher

The primary work in the exhibition is a short 3D animated film entitled “Dauphin 007” It is a film that manifests this Baudrillardian notion of distorted perceptions of history and schizophrenic reality, specifically in relation to narratives of Western power. Iconic elements are seamlessly integrated into each other; creating new symbols, animals and and narratives. Gravity and corporeality are sometimes used and sometimes ignored. There is an almost irresponsible use and misuse of these references all in order to create a new reality that is both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

A lion, a crown, an eagle and medical devices are the characters in this absurd narrative. The protagonist of this story is a male lion, born as a Dauphin (or heir apparent to the throne of France). His power is symbolized by a golden/plastic-like crown closely resembling the Heraldic Crown of the Dauphin of France, which pervades every scene in the film. An unfortunate incident at a photo-shoot results in the young lion's demise as a black eagle, modeled after the ones appearing in heraldry, steals it away. Now bereft of his potential power, the lion resorts to what appears to be a almost suicidal decapitation via guillotine. This is a clear reference to the demise of Louis XVI, or prior to his regal name, Louis-Auguste the 25th Dauphin of France. The guillotine itself is part MRI machine, part Gothic structure, part guillotine. Much in the same way medical devices allow us to transcend our bodies and nature, the Lion's decapitated head does not fall dead to ground, but rather grows angel-like wings and flies upward away towards heaven. This scene is followed by a recovery where the headless lion is on IV. His insides are not flesh or organs but rather a regal fleur-de lis patterned fabric, which references the colour of the Dauphin's coat of arms. Adding insult to injury, the now crowned eagle swoops down and steals the IV away from the lion. The film finally culminates with a tragic yet epic death, as the lion slowly withers away under a towering plastic monstrosity of various medical devices. IV

stands, surgery lights, respirators, x-ray machines all rotate in a kind of dance symbolizing the transcendence of corporeality into a plastic heaven-like realm. The denouement occurs as we catch a brief glimpse of the lion's head in a kind of after-life space, re-united with his crown. Heraldry is made flesh as the floating lions head is flanked by two supporters, whom are polar bears rigged out in royal CocaCola regalia.

Heraldry takes mythical animals, such as lions and eagles and pairs them with iconic symbols such as crowns. Once used as a way to identify persons of nobility and their hereditary, it has lost relevance today. It does still however maintain a mysterious aura of high society power, something akin to secret, exclusive knowledge. By bringing a lost history back to life, I am trying to create imagery and narrative that maintains yet distorts this mystical aura.

Stories and depictions of European kings tend to parallel the life of Christ. Likewise, the lion often times represents Christ (i.e. CS Lewis' novels) I will not get into the reasons for this, however Dauphin 007 shares this same tendency. It opens up with Nativity-like scene, depicts a crucifixion-like scene and ends with a Resurrection. Christian religious imagery and elements have always permeated my work. However I found that the work became in part about the religion itself.

My interest was never in commenting on religion, but rather exploring the powerful mystical and mythical aspects of Christian iconography. By using royal imagery and animals, Dauphin 007 allows me to explore these notions without getting caught up in religion.

Most of my animated works leading up to this thesis exhibition were essentially portraits; one creature isolated in an endless loop. While “Dauphin 007” can certainly be looked as a portrait of this unfortunate lion, it goes beyond my previous work by incorporating an antagonist and having a more distinct narrative. This is a direction I intend my future work to move in.

Chapter 4: Clay Dinosaurs

“I had to learn to do everything because I couldn't find another kindred soul. Now you see eighty people listed doing the same things I was doing by myself.” (Roger 4)

— Ray Harryhausen, early stop motion FX animator

I often acknowledge how influential commercial animation is to my artistic practice. But there is a significant gap between the production capabilities of a well-funded, well-staffed animation house and my one-man operation. By co-opting not just the tools of commercial 3d digital animation, but also its visual language, I do put myself in a somewhat subversive role. In a way it is like sneaking backstage at a marionette theater while the puppeteers are out, and trying to man all of the strings myself. The task of replicating the aesthetics of the commercial film industry, specifically trying to contend with the zenith of computer animation, is a seemingly insurmountable challenge, but this almost futile course of action has helped me garner a unique, personal aesthetic to my animations. Hidden at the core of this idiosyncratic look is a vital piece of information to the audience: some one, some singular person, made this. Although this may seem like a mundane observation, I feel it fundamentally changes an audiences relationship to my animations as it bears the mark of art-making. There is a deliberate quality to this puppeteering, my animals make gestural,

economic movements, and there is very little in the way of bells and whistles – each motion is concisely orchestrated and limited to what is necessary. It is because the feel of the motion is so precise that the specifics – each strand of hair falling where it should, rolls of skin or wrinkles properly stretching or compressing – can be glossed over or altogether ignored. I take a set of visual cues (both imagery and movement) normally associated with advertisements, cartoon, and narrative and simplify them, quieting the motions, turning the work into a form of portraiture.

As a result, my animals move more like Ray Harryhausen than they do to Pixar. Harryhausen, the prolific stop-motion guru behind many a sword-and-sandal epic, whom was active from the late 1940s up until 1980, is a noted critic of special effects that are overly realistic. (Roger 4) For Harryhausen, the drawback to hyper-realistic animation is a loss of the dream-like effect of watching something unreal, or constructed, such as clay, foam and wire, and even crude digital models, mimic reality. The transitional space between the hyper-realistic fake, Pygmalion's statue, and the real, the statue made flesh by Aphrodite, is where I like my work to operate. It is only in the space of this small gap in between, when we have a set of indicators that is just convincing enough to carry us into a frame of mind where we believe what we are experiencing is on the fringe of reality, that we

can have these profoundly unsettling moments where our mind flip-flops between recognition and nonrecognition, familiarity and foreignness, complete belief and utter disbelief.

Chapter 5: Expect More. Pay Less.

"We're plastic, but we still have fun"

— Lady Gaga, pop artist

Corporate logos are highly recognizable symbols. The logo of Target Corporation for instance is a remarkably simple and ubiquitous form, yet still is identifiable as that of the popular retail company. In my work “Hello Goodbye” I attempt to take this form and play with its identity; I attempt to create something new with these simple circles. The piece not only uses the shape of the target logo, but also references its large outdoor illuminated signage. However it is black and white, flat, on the ground and propped up against the wall. The most distinctive difference however is the surface, which consists of small, intricate and detailed Gothic patterns etched into the plastic with a CNC router. As a result the piece straddles the areas between highway signage and sacred artifact. Enhancing this notion is an hint of the handmade as some of the panels don’t quite fit together perfectly. Furthermore no effort was made to hide the cheap steel frame, yet the intense and detailed patterning suggests it is some kind of alien artifact of much importance. In fact I like to think of the piece as if some future civilization were given the task of re-assembling our present day after a total apocalypse, but they got certain things mixed up. There is marginal reference to the large target paintings of Kenneth

Noland, but by leaning, propped up against the wall the piece becomes monolithic, a towering alien symbol from a history that never happened.

“Hello Goodbye” does not directly relate to the film, and in fact there is little visual correspondence. However, the creation of each work relies on computer software and industry techniques. Moreover, they both embody my conceptual practice of iconic conflation, specifically in relation to commercial culture and Gothic imagery.

Chapter 6: Outro

The term conflate is particularly appropriate for my work as it means not just to mix two things together, but to mix them together in order to make a new entity, or in my case a new reality. It also tends to have an unwritten connotation of naivete. Not to say that my transformations of iconic imagery are naive, however I do intentionally act with a sense of irresponsibility.

I give my audience a set of indicators so they can believe what they are experiencing somehow comes from our reality and culture. However I organize these indicators to create perturbing moments where the mind can flip-flop between recognition and nonrecognition, familiarity and foreignness, complete certainty and utter ambiguity. For me, this is an interesting, often vulnerable, place to be, an invigorating space from which to observe, and a space that I try to construct. From this space, I hope an understanding can be gained into how digital media relates to our past and present and consequently uncover insight into where it is taking us.

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