

THE PROTAGONIST

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Having served as executive director of the Rochester Art Center for less than a year, Shannon Fitzgerald put on the mantle of curator to present *The Protagonist*, an ambitious exhibition of contemporary video animation. The exhibition, featuring six artists, had an international flavor and pushed the boundaries of the mediated image in order to express contemporary storytelling. Fitzgerald used the gallery space to its full potential, attempting to give each artist individuality and separation, but also to allow each body of work to build and flow from one to the next as viewers moved through the exhibition.

In the late 1970s and '80s, postmodernist photographers began creating “constructed realities” as a rejection of the documentary photography and *cinéma vérité* (“truth cinema”) that dominated the fine arts scene in the 1960s and early '70s. Artists such as Ellen Brooks, James Casebere, and Laurie Simmons created artificial worlds that questioned the notion that reality could be captured in photo-based imagery. They had been influenced by pioneering filmmaker Chris Marker, who questioned the very notion of a single reality, and mavericks like Errol Morris, whose groundbreaking film *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) accidentally gave birth to reality TV because of its liberal use of reenactment. Unfortunately, popular culture completely missed the point. As a result, early twenty-first century television is inundated with reality shows and Hollywood movies are saturated with computer-generated imagery. It is interesting to see the artists of *The Protagonist* return to the use of constructed realities as a counterpoint to these popular trends.

Many of the artists in *The Protagonist* clearly use video animation less for traditional narrative and more as a time-based means of creating visual art. Where possible, Fitzgerald presented remnants of their physical art alongside the animations. This was most apparent in the gallery space dedicated to the work of Allison Schulnik, where was presented two paintings directly related to her video pieces. Both of Schulnik's video pieces, *Hobo Clown* (2008) and *Mound* (2011), are closely connected to the act of painting. Using Claymation, she “paints” her characters, creating a narrative of transformation for the viewer through which she acknowledges the violence inherent in the act of creation. In *Hobo Clown*, the main character, a melancholy and emotive creature, is clearly patterned after the famous clown Weary Willie, created by Emmett Kelly in the 1930s. It is, however, the knock-offs of the hobo clown—the horrific paintings that adorned 1970s homes and that have made a resurgence in popular culture, that seem most to inspire Schulnik. Throughout the animation the artist gradually disappears, so that there is no mediator between the viewer and the “paint” itself. We watch the act of painting as her hobo dissolves, transforms, and is recreated through the clay; it

rolls back from its face to form flower shapes, the clay-as-paint being sloughed away and constantly reformed.

Mound uses similar techniques but does not achieve the same transcendent quality as *Hobo Clown*. A number of “characters” form a “mound” that is reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1504). As in that painting, the characters seem to be hanging out on parade, and no narrative is formed. Transformation happens as objects change into other shapes and grow faces, and the mound undulates, its transfigurations like deep breathing—but there is little character development. The video is accompanied by an incessant musical track that is excessively cloying and doesn't connect with the film until a group of longhaired figures emerges to perform choreographed movement to the music. Their elegant bodies bend over like hags, their long hair flowing on the ground. They dance, merge, and split like amoebas, a cross between Pina Bausch and *Fantasia*.

If Schulnik is motivated by imagery that existed before she was born, Barry Anderson longs for the nostalgia of his youth. *Junk Yard* (2011) and *Lawn Ornaments* (2009) were presented in a rotating loop in the next gallery, set high up on the wall like a drive-in movie or billboard, both connotations appropriate to the era of imagery the work references, the 1960s and '70s of Anderson's childhood. Visually intense and super-saturated, Anderson's videos have no soundtrack. It is refreshing to see video work with the confidence to reject audio, as too often a soundtrack adds little but an emotional shortcut; it was thus unfortunate that Anderson's work was so intruded upon by the soundtrack from Schulnik's film *Mound* in the next gallery.

Like Schulnik and several other artists in *The Protagonist*, Anderson's films are very connected to the physical visual arts. For *Junk Yard*, Anderson collected images from online sources, painstakingly photographing and mapping them together in space. As a result, the images are lush and hyperreal, at once reminding us of the superficial fiction of the sugarcoated '70s (think Karen Carpenter), while at the same time commenting on the heightened reality of contemporary CGI. Visually, *Junk Yard* sits comfortably alongside movies like *Avatar* (2009, directed by James Cameron). Superheroes, cartoon characters, souvenirs, and logos all collide with one another and vie for screen time, not unlike contemporary fiction films that market action figures before the movie is released. The imagery is playful, but nevertheless, reminds us that it is never innocent. The more seductive the imagery, the more it is selling, whether a mood or product. To be nostalgic in America is to long for “stuff.”

Janus 2 (2011), Anderson's brilliant two-channel video installation located in another space of the Art Center and presented on two HD TV screens, offered the viewer a sugar fix in a nonstop consumable experience. With a nod to Nam June Paik's multi-monitor pieces, *Janus 2* is reminiscent of a screensaver glorified with subliminal messages; circular images randomly create whirling spirals across each screen, seeming to move from one monitor to the other. Of all the pieces in the show, this most exemplified how our culture has transformed since Anderson's youth. As we constantly look back and are often consumed, and defined, by the imagery of our past, we are ever more inundated with new pictures that confuse and



exploit us. Our sped-up world does not seem to leave room for anything other than a surface understanding of this imagery, as Vicky Goldberg noted in her introduction to *The Power of Photography*: by the turn of the twentieth century, “photographs had become superabundant, transient, superfluous.”² Yet with careful inspection and attention paid to Anderson’s work, along with time spent on multiple viewings, viewers may dig beneath the surface. Nevertheless, Anderson’s is an essentially optimistic view of the current visual age, as he embraces its artifice.

The work of Tara Najd Ahmadi also addresses consumerism, but with a more dystopian view. She works with more primitive techniques, using puppets, cutout photos, and handmade stage sets rather than sophisticated software. Whereas Anderson’s videos have a physical presence that is heightened by gallery viewing, Ahmadi’s work would be quite at home on YouTube. This homemade quality serves Ahmadi’s purpose; her work is personal and feels like it is made with expediency. There is also a clear nod here to the rich history of puppets as instruments of subversive speech. As an Iranian artist making work in America, perhaps she is also fulfilling our expectations—her work is a little less slick, a little more cut-and-paste than our technology-centric culture craves, but also easily accessible.

Ahmadi’s three short video diaries, *Productive Frustration #1*, *#2*, and *#3* (2012), are diaristic ruminations on her family’s history within the context of the Iranian Revolution and her current identity as an Iranian living in America. Ahmadi resists the trap of presenting an “exoticized” view of the Other, leaving out explanations or translations for an American audience. Despite this resistance, however, the irony is that what differentiates her diaries from the hundreds of thousands of self-narratives available online is the exoticism of her experience. Chris Marker achieved a sort of neutrality in *Sans Soleil* (1983) by adding a layer of fiction (his ruminations were in the form of a letter read by an actress), but also by acknowledging his outsider status. Like Marker, Ahmadi layers imagery, sound, and diaristic narrative. The work is lyrical, but it remains distant. Nor was it helped by the presentation of the videos. In an uncharacteristic misstep by the Art Center, the videos were presented on TV screens with short headphone cords, forcing viewers to sit much too close to the monitors to fully appreciate the videos.

Gut Theory (2010) is a much stronger piece and much more fun. With the irreverence of a JibJab video, cutout paper characters consume whatever they can get into their mouths—information in the form of books, TV, conversation, or money—which then visibly travels through their digestive systems until it is extruded. “Data” is produced in excess, none of it appearing to add any value to a system that continues on and further cannibalizes the data stream. The characters demonstrate a consciousness of being looked at, but also an acknowledgement of looking back at the audience. The audience does not just gaze, but is gazed upon. This double surveillance has become an ever-present and accepted aspect of American culture.³ Being watched and controlled by the state—something that Ahmadi’s family dealt with in a very insidious way during her childhood in Iran—is clearly present in the *Productive Frustration* videos. The addition of these videos alongside *Gut Theory* situate a deeper personal meaning that might not exist were it shown on its own. Ahmadi’s characters occasionally sneak peeks at the audience, making the viewer complicit with the piece in a way she does not achieve with the *Productive Frustration* work. As a result, it has a more universal appeal and successfully puts its finger on the information gluttony of contemporary society.

Marina Zurkow also makes work that acknowledges audience complicity. Although the protagonists in her video *Slurb* (2009) only occasionally break the fourth wall to look at the viewer, the mesmerizing quality of the imagery is captivating, and it is clear that we are looking at one possible future of our own making. Looking at Zurkow’s work is like watching a moving painting. *Slurb* functions like a live Chinese scroll, slowly panning through a world of characters functioning with futility through a futuristic landscape deluged by a storm (in progress or the aftermath), but not without hope. Whereas Schulnik’s reference to painting is physical and labored, Zurkow’s delicate drawings reference midcentury Disney animation and, as a result, seem to long for an age of fantasy. Layers comprising the animation include relentless waves posterized into beautiful blue and aqua color fields undulating throughout; broken-down structures and remnants of buildings; rocks and tire piles, transformed into landing places for birds and crabs—all complemented by jellyfish, at times being collected by boaters patrolling the waters. The soundtrack has the repetitive plea of carnival music—futuristic but nostalgic.

Weights + Measures (2007) is a much simpler and shorter piece. As in *Slurb*, Zurkow emphasizes the importance of water—so taken for granted, so necessary for life, yet so dangerous. Again set in the water, *Weights + Measures* at once celebrates the intrepid fortitude of the natural world with improbably swimming elephants, and highlights the danger of relying too heavily on technology, as airplanes float helplessly to the bottom of the screen. Persistence and perseverance is present in both videos; even in deluge and ruin, the environment will continue to transform and provide.

Transitioning to the galleries featuring the work of Belgian artist Catharina van Eetvelde felt like walking into light after being immersed in the watery depths of Zurkow’s work. The Rochester Art Center is fortunate to be housed in a beautifully designed building that takes full advantage of light itself as an art form. This

Above

Still from *Hobo Clown* (2008) by Allison Schulnik; courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, California

perfectly complemented the work of van Eetvelde, whose playful drawings and videos revel in line and shape and form. Interested in systems and mapping, van Eetvelde creates animations that, to a casual viewer, may appear too abstract to hold interest but, given time, are deeply rewarding. Featured in a large space were two distinct pieces, *Cruise* (2004–5) and *erg* (2009–10). These were accompanied by several drawings from *Cruise* and a suite of eighty-three drawings used in the Flash animation of *erg*. The inclusion of the drawings was instrumental to understanding and appreciating the complexity of van Eetvelde's videos. The choice to place the video projections close to the ground was rewarding for the viewer as it added to the childlike curiosity emitted by the work.

Drawings of Noise (2012) and *Slice* (2005–7) were presented together on HD TV monitors in a separate room, also complemented by drawings. In both films, van Eetvelde is interested in how structure flows through the organic and uses text to emphasize this. As an example, at one point during *Cruise*, her narrator chants "isometric system in isotropic shape," using the words descriptively, yet creating an ancillary poetic mantra. This happens often within the narrative, as van Eetvelde's interest in the abstract results in an exploration of the poetic nature of the systems we have created. "How to map, round or flat?" begs an investigation of the relationship of language to mapping. *Slice* also explores this relationship between poetic and organic systems, not only with the use of text, but with her animated drawings that magically transfigure from the inside to the outside of imagined creatures.

Presented in a gallery slightly apart from the other artists, Hank Willis Thomas makes the greatest use of traditional narrative in his video *Winter in America* (2006, made in collaboration with Kambui Olujimi). Telling the story of the murder of his cousin, Songha, outside a Philadelphia nightclub, Thomas uses the G.I. Joe dolls he played with as a youth in an elegant stop-action video that pays homage to American filmmaking. Also

featured is a photograph of a black man's head with the Nike logo branded onto the side (*Branded Head*, 2003) from one of Thomas's earlier photographic projects. This same photo is displayed on a billboard during the opening scene of the video, setting up the audience to consider the commodification of black men's bodies in contemporary America, so often inflated to obscene proportions within professional sports, yet less than worthless on the street, as demonstrated by the murder of Thomas's cousin over a gold necklace.

Despite its brutal subject matter, *Winter in America* is beautiful to look at. Thomas and Olujimi use shallow depth and clever photography, mimicking a rich history of action movies in a loving, although critical, way. These references cause the audience to consider how black men are presented in the media. The parting shot, an overhead view of Songha laying face down in the snow, blood pooled around his body, can't help but be seen as a reference to *Taxi Driver* (1976, directed by Martin Scorsese), an iconographical American film, thus heightening Songha's tragedy and, by implication, that of African American men in the American lexicon.

The Protagonist was an ambitious and extremely successful survey of some trends in contemporary fine art animation. Well thought through and exceptionally presented, it allowed the work of each artist to communicate with that of the others. Never repetitive, it explored storytelling for the twenty-first century, which, given the disjointed narrative emphasis of our internet-saturated society, is increasingly nonlinear and non-narrative.

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NOTES 1. See Žižek, Felix, Andreas Vowinckle, and Michael Köhler, *Constructed Realities: The Art of Staged Photography* (Zurich: Edition Stemmle, 1995). 2. See "Under the Influence of Photography," from *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), 16. 3. During the writing of this article, the revelation that the National Security Administration has been collecting telephone data made headlines. A Pew Research Center Washington Post poll shows that the majority of Americans are accepting of the phone tracking as an anti-terrorism tool. See www.people-press.org/2013/06/10/majority-views-nsa-phone-tracking-as-acceptable-anti-terror-tactic/.

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