Jonathan Monaghan's Escape Pod (2015)

Throughout the centuries, technological innovation has revolutionized art making and video technology revolutionized the art of the moving image. Where cinema was an expensive and tedious process, the mobility, affordability and immediacy of video became a viable and effective part of many art practices.[1] Beginning in the mid-1960s, inspired by the growing ubiquity of television and its mass audience, video artists discovered new ways of telling stories, engaging world events, challenging perception, and working outside of traditional art institutions and markets. The work of video artists often challenged the stereotypes and norms presented by Hollywood and television programming. They infiltrated mass media or adopted the look of mass media in order to infiltrate the public consciousness. Martha Rosler wrote: "Artists were responding not only to the positioning of the mass audience but also to the particular silencing or muting of artists as producers of living culture in the face of the vast mass-media industries: the culture industry versus the consciousness industry."[2] The invention and pervasiveness of digital technologies and the World Wide Web has further revolutionized and complicated cultural production. Affordable creative software, cell phone cameras, and an endless cycling of internet images has created an entirely new infrastructure of accessibility and production. The look of computer generated images, virtual worlds, and computer games has informed our aesthetic sensibilities in new ways as well. Jonathan Monaghan's video *Escape Pod*, accompanied by his digital collages *After Fabergé*, currently on view at Bitforms Gallery in New York, firmly situates Monaghan's art practice in the digital realm. His work reveals a great deal about how

[1] Rush, Michael. *Video Art*. Thames & Hudson. London, UK. 2007.
[2] Rosler, Martha. *Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment*. Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001. MIT Press. Cambridge MA. 2006.

digital technology can be employed to challenge our notions of what we see, inform our sense of space, re-examine the space we inhabit, and question the meaning of spaces and objects in the world around us.

Immediately the rich colors and hyper-clear textures of the work stood out against the minimal, white cube gallery. The video, playing on a moderately sized white monitor set on the floor in the far back corner of the space, had a certain irresistible gravitational pull (Figures 1 & 2). But I could not pass by the four very large framed digital collages that lined the walls without stopping to examine them. The photographic collage series, titled *After Faberge*, is a mix of Faberge eggs, modernist furniture, body parts, satellite dishes, architecture, and retail space. Each object is centered on an empty white background and nearly fills the picture frame. It is not difficult to read them as alien crafts except all the components are familiar, mined from the (albeit luxurious) detritus of our everyday lives. There is no imaginable utilitarian purpose for the compounded objects, yet their realness seems undeniable. These objects are surreal – even hyperreal. *After Faberge* are powerful socio-political mash ups of consumerism, technology, and the human body. The tension that arises from the clash of the work's ambiguity and clarity is very compelling and opens the possibility of self- and cultural-reflection. Monaghan says, "There is more to mass-cultural products than escapism; they represent our ideals, dreams, uncertainties, and fears. By analyzing and re-interpreting these products we are gaining more insight into who we are, and that is what I am doing with my work."[3] Monaghan has masterfully used digital technology to make these seamless collages and, in doing so, confounds reality and fantasy. Moreover, there is an indexical relationship between the collages and the video - both in imagery

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[3] Gamescenes. *Interview: Jonathan Monaghan Is Unmasking Ideology With 3D Animation.* Art In The Age Of Videogames. Web. 05/26/2013.

and meaning. Although these are not still images from the video, all of the objects and images appear (separately) in the video. Keeping in mind that a digital video is not actually a moving image but rather successive still images set into motion, it is easy to interpret these as stills. "Cinema [or in this case digital animation] undresses photography, so to speak, as the latter performs the same function reciprocally." Writes Tanya Leighton. "The still photographic image can be recovered under the new technological conditions as a site for a critical distance between the conflicting temporalities of the inscription of film's own history and the progression of the narrative."[4] The narrative of the video exists in the digital collages and vice-versa.

Turning my attention to the video, *Escape Pod* is a computer animated HD film created using 3D Studio Max animation software. It is a twenty minute seamless loop. Although the narrative has a beginning and end, it's very difficult to locate that point without watching several times. When I began watching, the shot was a close up of a pulsating anus, very realistic, surrounded by what appeared to be an ornate gilded frame. As the camera pans out it is revealed to be the anus of a golden stag standing at the crest of a snowy hill. Everything besides the anus has the look of computer animation making for a stark visual and tactile contrast. The camera moves around presenting a side view, the stag roars and its warm breath creates a foggy cloud in the cold air. It is clear from the look of the video that we are in a virtual world but the realness of the anus and the perfectly rendered vapor of breath confuse reality and virtuality.

Clearly Monaghan is very skilled at computer animation. Formerly a computer game designer, he notes, "I started making artwork with the same skills and techniques that I had mastered on the commercial level but with a subject matter and context that was very different than the commercial end of it."[5] The stag turns its head, looks the viewer directly in the eyes,

[4] Leighton, Tanya. *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*. Tate Publishing. London England. 2008.
[5] Boyer, Jake. *Exclusive: Jet Off In Jonathan Monaghan's Escape Pod*. Milkmade.com. March 18, 2015.

then takes off running. The look is a knowing one. It feels like an announcement saying, 'here we go, you are coming on a journey with me.' The stag runs across a vast plain towards the ocean, mountains rising on the left. Our point of view is initially behind the stag but we catch up and view him from the side. The movement of the stag's body and muscles is beautifully crafted. As the stag nears the shoreline a spacecraft-like object comes into view, floating overhead. The underside of the craft is a hairy scrotum. Above that is a ring of ornate gilded molding with small rainbow colored orbs spaced evenly around the perimeter topped by a circular palatial neo-classical building which is, in turn, topped with a simple, contemporary house. Hovering in front of the stag, the craft lowers an escalator almost all the way to the ground. An odd, sperm-like creature flies out of the stag's anus and follows the escalator up towards an illuminated anus-like portal on the underside of the craft. Once inside, the escalator folds up and the craft begins to move away. Inside the craft we are facing a BoConcept[6] modernist sofa from whose cushions a baby stag is born. It quickly gets its legs and via an egg-like craft is transported to a duty free store with orderly stocked shelves of alcohol and riot gear. Continuing on, the stag encounters the sperm-like creature from the adult stag's anus in an airport security checkpoint. The camera zooms out through a sphincter and the video begins again.

Narratively, Monaghan's video is rife with symbolism some of which is clear and some oblique. How does one begin to parse the images and narrative to find meaning? Thinking back to the first time I saw Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* or Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* or even Marina Zurkow's *Slurb*, I recall how challenging it was to make sense of these works. Each utilizes technological innovation, relies heavily on symbolism, interweaves reality and fantasy, suggests a narrative in order to comment on the human condition. It was only after multiple

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[6] Press Release. Jonathan Monaghan: *Escape Pod.* Bitforms Gallery. Mar 22 – May 3, 2015.

viewings – and some research - that I was able to find (or insert) meaning into the work. Monaghan actually credits Barney for inspiring his turn from the commercial world to fine art, "Looking at Barney's surreal films was very influential. Seeing that type of work operate in the contemporary art context was something that gave me a little more initiative to start working in this way."[7] The ways in which Monaghan emulates Barney is clear not only in his use of technology, biology, and mythology, but also in his aesthetics and attention to detail. It is impossible to walk away from either artist's work without feeling like you have tread, almost voyeuristically, into their imagination and their consciousness. Monaghan says, "If you look at my work, there's a lot of this kind of neurotic perfectionism. Part of it is a part of the process, but a lot of it is time and energy. I guess there's this kind of obsessive, fetishistic element of perfection to a lot of my work."[8] Everything - stag, landscape, craft, retail shop, airport terminal, body part - is spotlessly clean, luxurious, richly colored, expertly drawn, and seamlessly interwoven. Monaghan uses technology but also comments on technology and throughout *Escape Pod's* post-humanist universe we see hybrid creations of technology and human body, technology and utilitarian object, technology and architecture, technology and luxury.

Sometimes, it is difficult to decipher whether Monaghan is presenting a dystopic or utopian perspective. The challenge to sort this out is reinforced by the juxtaposition of dreamy seductive beauty and riot gear (to cite one example). Nonetheless, the work imagines some future, already in our collective consciousness, where human and technological realms merge into new forms. It is easy to see why *Escape Pod* is contemporary and compelling when, in this moment, so many people engage the world - and virtual worlds - through their devices: playing, communicating, dating, documenting, and shopping. Monaghan notes, "I think the path for

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[7] Boyer.
[8] Ibid

myself is different than an older generation of artists who studied art initially then found technology as a medium. For me and many other young artists the technology came first and I think that is very important."[9] For younger artists and their peers the ability to create (virtually) their own worlds is commonplace. Cinema and video can require elaborate sets or demand that artists work on location. Today an artist can sit at a computer and generate a universe. Lev Manovich says, "It is becoming clear that it is ultimately more advantageous to simulate the world than to film it directly. A simulated image can represent a non-existent reality, it can be endlessly modified, it is more manageable."[10] The plasticity of a computer generated reality is limited only by the imagination of the artist and the tools of the technology.

Similar to his masterful and obsessive use of technology, Monaghan's choices of object and image seem thoughtfully calculated. The golden stag is a symbol from myth and the bible. The ornate gilded frame, palatial architecture, and Faberge eggs speak of excess and luxury. Other themes in *Escape Pod* include birth, journey, and never ending cycles. From mythology to the height of technological innovation, from fantasy world to present day consciousness, the video spans vast time and space. "The deer in many mythologies is able traverse worlds, representing a connection in some way to an alternate reality, so it is an apt icon to use when creating this virtual space." Monaghan explains, "In hunting mythologies it also represents the unobtainable. I think that's a good way to describe our condition and interactions with technology; there is a lot of uncertainty and unfulfilled desire."[11] Even though I find these symbols and his cultural critique significant, it is the lens of technology that is most potent for

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[9] Gamescenes.

[10] Lev Manovich and Jeffrey Shaw & Hans Peter Schwarz (eds). *Cinema and Digital Media. Perspectives of Media Art*. Cantz Verlag Ostfildern, Germany. 1996.

[11] Pangburn, DJ. *Surreal Futurescapes Abound in Jonathan Monaghan's Dystopian 'Escape Pod' Show*. Konbini.com. April 2015.
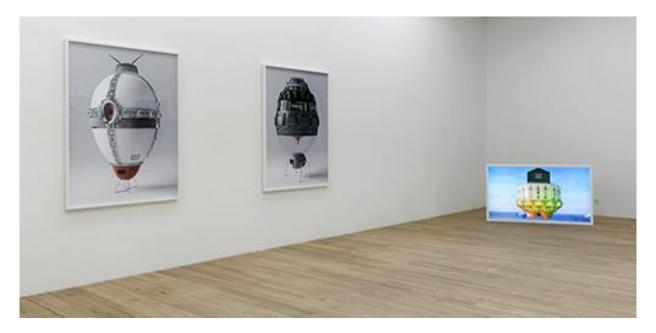
me. Utilizing software, virtual space, and familiar media, Monaghan is able to take a position and stealthily enter our consciousness and inspire criticality. The artist notes, "I just love playing with the photo-real, there is a seductive sexiness to it. The software I used to create photo-realism was developed for that very purpose, to create seductive images to draw you in and make you feel good so you want to buy something. I am drawing you in to unsettle you and to examine these aesthetic effects."[12]

The digital age, fueled by the ever-expanding internet and the ownership of networked devices by much of the privileged world, speaks not only to our individual experience but also to our collective experience. It is not the case that artists are only using technology as way to make art, what is taking place is a redefinition of collaboration, space, and materiality as well as a both a theoretical challenge to and a continuation of historical notions of the meaning and importance of art. Gene Youngblood wrote: "We have defined the difference between art and entertainment in scientific terms and have found entertainment to be inherently entropic, opposed to change, and art to be inherently negentropic, a catalyst to change. The artist is always an anarchist, a revolutionary, a creator of new worlds imperceptibly gaining on reality."[13] Not only does digital technology provide tools for making art it is also fodder for art. From the space in our monitors to the vastness of the World Wide Web, hyperreality to virtual worlds, new technologies challenge our perception of community, authenticity, materiality, and location. The nature of the beast confounds reality and virtuality, confuses time and space, conflates production and consumption. *Escape Pod* could be viewed as aesthetically artificial or banal to someone not

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[12] Gamescenes.
[13] Youngblood, Gene. *Expanded Cinema*. E.P. Dutton; 1st edition. 1970. Page 65.

familiar with digital animation. Its meaning and purpose may also be opaque to those not willing to invest in the narrative. But, in *Escape Pod*, Monaghan has adeptly used and critiqued technology in a way that incites me to question my place in the world around me.

(Figures 1 & 2) *Jonathan Monaghan: Escape Pod.* Bitforms Gallery. Mar 22 – May 3, 2015.

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