

Art Review

Issue 17, December 2007



Best... Flame War... Ever... (King of Bards vs. Squire Rex, June 2004), 2007, two-channel 3D computer animations with sound on two 42-inch HD plasma screens, 12 min
Courtesy Postmasters Gallery, New York

Presenting the values and behavioural patterns of society's subcultures has been a staple of contemporary art since the 1970s; think Nan Goldin's slideshows of drug-addled friends and willing subjects or, more recently, Cameron Jamie's investigation into the world of backyard wrestling. But not many people would want to look at photos of videogame players sitting in front of monitors, engrossed in their fantasy lives. Yet Eddo Stern has found a way to translate the world of videogaming into vivid, tangible artworks by combining the raw material of this increasingly mainstream and popular pastime and repurposing it for his own needs.

Three video animations on LCD displays grab your attention with their bright colours and morphing shapes, and without even listening to the audio elements, work on a purely visual level. *Best... Flame War... Ever... (King of Bards vs. Squire Rex, June 2004)* (all works 2007) is based on a conflict between two testosterone-fuelled gamers regarding the other's degree of expertise in the game *EverQuest*. Not being able to solve their feud online, one suggested a real-life grudge match. While the crossover into real life by these fanatical gamers is disturbing and telling, watching the animation on the two side-by-side screens is equally engrossing, since their faces are created by combining dozens of the graphics, characters and weapons one encounters in the game itself, like contemporary Arcimboldo paintings. Another work, *Level Sounds Like Devil (BabyInChrist vs. His Father, May 2006)*, features the same technique, but in this animation an adopted teenage boy and recent convert to fundamentalist Christianity struggles to come to terms with his father's distaste for the game *World of Warcraft*. The boy posts a question about his dilemma on online Christian forums and receives support over his father's intransigent stance on the game, which he thinks is evil and will corrupt his son.

A series of striking, colourful kinetic mixed-media sculptures fill the main gallery, with small spotlights casting shadows on the walls. Works such as *Man, Woman, Dragon* and *Tsunami*, while almost childlike, are gorgeous objects that touch on the core elements of gaming: fantasy, conflict and roleplay. Stern's combination of old and new technology suggests that the computer animation we see today will appear primitive in the not-too-distant future.

Portal, Wormhole, Flythrough, a large sculptural video installation in the rear gallery, is the most straightforward work, and utterly captivating. Comprising found animations of vortexes and theoretical passageways in space, it's hard to take your eyes off, with its rapid, kaleidoscopic graphics and hypnotic soundtrack. Stern is more than just a commentator on the world of online gaming; he is immersed in its culture, having spent one year and more than 2,000 hours playing *World of Warcraft*, the world's most popular online roleplaying game. Stern's art goes beyond collectable objects and documents a certain lifestyle that can only get more prevalent as technology develops. Ultimately, you can think of Stern's work as either an invitation to greater possibilities in our virtual lives or a warning that we're too dependent on this type of behaviour already. *Chris Bors*

EDDO STERN

POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NEW YORK
8 SEPTEMBER - 13 OCTOBER