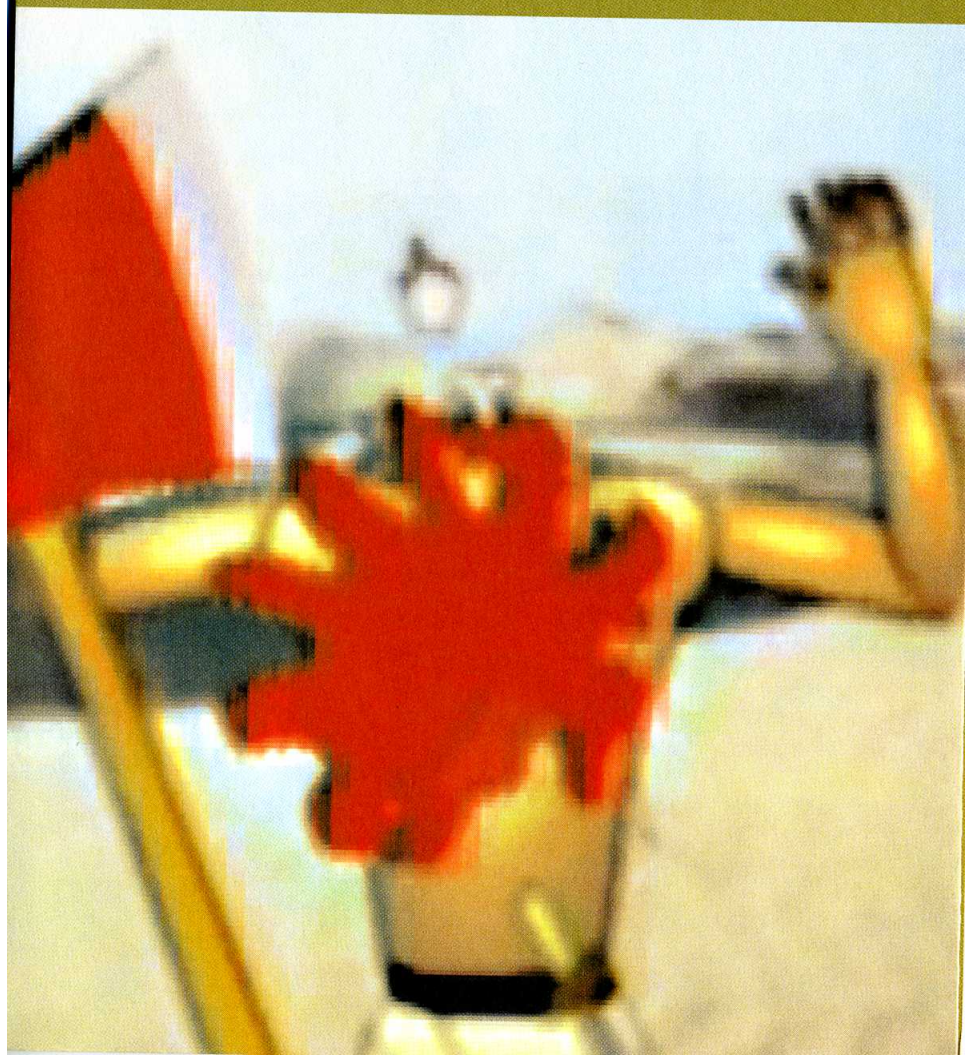


present  
tense

contemporary project series NO. 29

*Eddo  
Stern*



## THE HORRORS

*Contested lands are never absent from warfare. In the virtual realm of computer war games, simulated terrains remain integral to narratives that wed fantasy and logic. Eddo Stern modifies games to reveal how landscape sublimates ideology. He positions his three recent videos – Sheik Attack (2000), Vietnam Romance (2003) and Deathstar (2004) – between history and nostalgia, technology and mythology, documentary and fiction. Each illustrates a great rationalization – entrenchment of decayed ideals, redemption recouped from futility, vengeance meted upon a phantom – drawn respectively from popular versions of the establishment of the Israeli state, the American episode in Vietnam, and the current War on Terrorism. The perspective is from California, perceived indicator of social trends and intersection of the entertainment, high-tech and defense industries. Hollywood renditions of the passage from Old World to New are the precedents from which the new, digitally concocted battlegrounds ensue.*

The long cooperation between the US Defense Department and the computer industry is well established, famously noted in a December 1972 *Rolling Stone* article by Stewart Brand entitled "Spacewar." Games produced for recruiting purposes – see *America's Army* (2002) and *America's Army Special Forces* (2003) at [www.goarmy.com](http://www.goarmy.com) – define industry standards for realism and playability. Commercial games, such as those inspired or produced by author Tom Clancy – *Rogue Spear* (1999) or *Ghost Recon* (2001) – are widely played by military personnel who have adopted them as training tools. With soldiers and former soldiers demanding that games be faithful to their combat experiences, in an era when reporting from combat zones is sharply curtailed, it may be concluded that war games convey a modicum of documentary veracity. However, they preclude the points of view of other witnesses. Under the modern motto of "An Army of One," personal conduct is the main element.

Due to Stern's mastery of game play, conduct is difficult to differentiate from predestination. His motifs maneuver through the built-in constraints of software to elucidate tensions between display (magic, desire) and technology

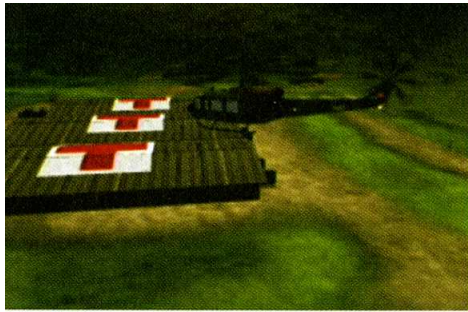
(science, law). In the gaming spectrum, Stern reconciles these disparities in medievalist fantasy, an ostensibly pacifist longing for a time before such oppositions diverged. Medievalism, however, also forebodes the present-day political morass, wherein the intellectual premises of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, et cetera, once assumed settled, are open to challenge. By inverting games upon their intended outcomes, Stern demonstrates that paradox is an inherent host to dispute.

*Sheik Attack* begins with a wide-eyed paean to Zionism, grounded in the *kibbutz* ethic of hard work and strict principles in fulfillment of a covenant with God. A tribe of women scurry over virgin territory, building a utopian motherland with hammers and nails. The scenario is dated 1966, just prior to the Six Day War. Cut forward to the complicated present: Tel Aviv/Relentless City, Israeli commandos engaged in night raids into Lebanon, a nation blanketed in darkness and sleep, and a culminating fiasco, a raid in which both the enemy and his hostage are assassinated. Breaking the rules of the game and the laws of engagement, Stern scripts an incident to which testimony is eliminated. Folk songs popularized on Israeli radio allude to accompanying professions of innocence and inevitability.

On a game mission, only acts of soldiery are tested; everything else is presumed status quo. In *Vietnam Romance*, the antagonists have already been taken out by the artist-shooter, so the viewer encounters a series of empty stage sets. Stern manipulates the scenery to approximate as closely as possible classic shots from *Full Metal Jacket*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*. Pop songs rendered from MIDI (computer music) files, neo-nostalgic for the 1960s, embellish emotional response, just as they did in the movies. They knit together a sequence of alternately languid, chaotic and hallucinatory vignettes that refer to the great disorienting narratives of the American Vietnam experience, both cinematic and literary. Rainfall, defoliant bullets blasting away at a skull, the transportation of a fallen soldier over jungles from which the earth has been digitally excoriated, these are Stern's evocations of an incessant war that still lingers in the public imagination.

In games, dead warriors are resurrected to fight again. In *Deathstar*, pilloried caricatures of Osama bin Laden, gathered from folk game sites downloaded from the Internet, become a torrent of mockery, savagery and mutilation, visited on a villain who cannot die enough. The figure separates from his setting. Bin Laden's real disappearance in fact turned him into a man of the hills, witness the subsequent pummeling of Afghanistan and scouring of Pakistan. Close-ups transform his body into topography. Punishment inscribes cartographic markings in the flesh. Bloodletting redraws the map. Display cursors resemble aerial bombsights. The epic/mystic sound track raises the scope upward still to a God's-eye view on catastrophic beliefs.

**Ben Portis**  
Assistant Curator, Contemporary Art



## FORT PALADIN: AMERICA'S ARMY

Keywords: Tolkien, Christ, Your Empire and Your Desktop  
*Fort Paladin* is a medieval computer castle automaton trained to kill and master the US Army 's infamous recruitment/training game, *America's Army*, using electro-mechanics and a custom-written expert system.

*GodsEye* is borrowed from the computer gaming term "God's-eye perspective," which positions the player as a God/General/Wizard floating above the world, awarded total control over cities, armies and minions. *GodsEye* consists of several computer sculptures that make up a techno-/neo-medieval landscape built around the functional hardware elements of a computer desktop environment: keyboard, mouse, monitor, tower, etc. Formally, it draws from the subcultures of custom computer-case modifications, hardware hacking, computer-game modification and sampling.

### Eddo Stern

#### WORKS EXHIBITED

*Sheik Attack*, 2000  
 Digital video with sound  
*Vietnam Romance*, 2003  
 Digital video with sound  
*Deathstar*, 2004  
 Digital video with sound

*Crusade*, 2002  
 Kinetic computer-case sculpture with software  
 Collection of Ann Hoger and Robert Conn,  
 San Diego

*Fort Paladin: America's Army*, 2003  
 Kinetic computer-case sculpture with software

*Triple Double*, 2004  
 Kinetic computer-case sculpture with software

All works are courtesy of the artist and Postmasters Gallery, New York, except as indicated.

Eddo Stern was born in Tel Aviv in 1972 and grew up in the small town of Omer in Israel's southern Negev Desert. Stern's father was an American who immigrated to Israel in 1967, following the Six Day War. Eddo first lived in the United States to attend the University of California for a year before fulfilling mandatory duty in the Israeli military. He was posted near the border with Lebanon from 1990 to 1993. He returned to California to continue his studies and received an interdisciplinary BA, in Philosophy, Computer Sciences and Visual Arts, from UC, Santa Cruz, in 1997. After university Stern worked for two years in the Silicon Valley computer industry programming virtual reality simulations. He received his MFA in Art and Integrated Media from the California Institute for the Arts in 2000. Stern is now a visiting faculty member at both CalArts and the University of Southern California. He lives and works north of Los Angeles near Quail Lake, CA.

Stern's interests span new narrative and documentary modes and cross-cultural/cross-media representations in film, computer games and on the Internet. Since 1998 his work has been exhibited in group exhibitions at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Tate Liverpool, Walker Art Center, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, and New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. He is represented by Postmasters Gallery, New York, where he has had solo exhibitions in 2002 and 2003. *Sheik Attack* and *Vietnam Romance* have been shown in numerous video and new-media festivals worldwide. In 1999 he started C-Level, a cooperative new-media lab and art space in LA's Chinatown. C-Level's most acclaimed project, *Waco Resurrection*, an interactive game environment that returns David Koresh and the Branch Davidians to battle with US federal law enforcement agencies in Waco, Texas, has been presented at diverse venues including The Kitchen, New York, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, the Rotterdam Film Festival and Grand Arts, Kansas City. Stern is currently working on a series of pinball machines, collectively titled *Redball*, which consider the post-Soviet Russian state through its faltering technological icons such as the Mir space station, the Chernobyl nuclear facility and the Kursk submarine disaster.

See [www.eddostern.com](http://www.eddostern.com)



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#### PRESENT TENSE

The work of contemporary artists is the museum's link to the present. As a continuous series of projects, Present Tense attempts to share with the viewer the range and complexity of artistic production in our time. The series is intended to offer a timely and intimate encounter with recent work both by younger and more established artists. By focusing on the variety of approaches and issues within contemporary artistic practice that contribute to today's critical debates, Present Tense is an invitation to engage in a creative process of inquiry and discovery.

#### Present Tense is generously supported by The Contemporary Circle

Contemporary programming at the AGO is supported by the Canada Council for the Arts through Programming and Operations Assistance to Art Museums and Public Galleries.



#### Present Tense 29

Eddo Stern  
 June 16 – August 29, 2004

Art Gallery of Ontario  
 ISBN 1-894243-41-2  
 Graphic design: Bryan Gee with Evelina Petruskas

AGO

## Art Gallery of Ontario

The Art Gallery of Ontario is partially funded by the Ontario Ministry of Culture. Additional operating support is received from the Volunteers of the Art Gallery of Ontario, City of Toronto, the Department of Canadian Heritage, and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Detail of *Fort Paladin: America's Army*, 2003  
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