ART REVIEW

A Muse in the Machine: Click. Create.

By ROBERTA SMITH
Published: May 26, 2011

Librado Romero/The New York Times

Some works in Cory Arcangel's solo show at the Whitney Museum of Art reflect his longstanding interest in television and video games.

In the ramp-up to the show Mr. Arcangel achieved something of a journalistic triple crown: profiles in New York magazine, The New Yorker and the Arts & Leisure section of The New York Times. These pieces detailed his early fascination with television and computers; his undergraduate years at Oberlin College, where he switched his focus from classical guitar to technology in music; his love of obsolete electronic equipment and programs; and the splash he made in the 2004 Whitney Biennial with "Super Mario Clouds v2k3."

Projected on four walls of a small gallery, this work consisted of a hacked program of the Super Mario Brothers video game, scrubbed clean of everything but its background: the puffy white clouds pulsing along on a pixelated blue sky. Its quietly animated fusion of Pop, Minimalism and giddy innocence was one of the exhibition's high points.

But Mr. Arcangel's Whitney solo turn does not quite live up to its advance attention. For one thing, it too seems a trifle scrubbed clean, sanitized and austere. Containing work almost entirely from 2011, it tells us little of his funkier early digital efforts, or artistic development. A few pieces reflect his longstanding interest in television and video games; in others he tries too hard to establish his formalist bona fides wryly with riffs on abstract painting and sculpture.

The Arcangel show, organized by Christiane Paul, the museum's adjunct curator of new media arts, has the Whitney trending young, hip and fashion forward, if a bit skimpy. Mr. Arcangel, who just turned 33, is the youngest artist since Bruce Nauman in 1973 to be accorded an entire floor at the museum. Yet, like the Whitney's small lobby shows, this effort comes with only with a brochure, not a thick catalog. No big case for greatness is posited; we're just being shown some fresh, new art, barely six months of work. Signaling modesty and flexibility, the Whitney has momentarily shifted to alternative-space mode, which may be the perfect gesture for the week when it also broke ground for its new downtown home in the meatpacking district.

As seen here Mr. Arcangel comes across as an artist who has parlayed his interest in electronic gadgetry and his infatuation with past avant-gardes into a low-affect art-about-art that too often flickers to fragile life only after you've ingested a dry, didactic wall label. The pieces on view are full of savvy echoes of early video art and structuralist film; kinetic, Conceptual and Pop art and their current derivatives; abstract painting; and, above all, appropriation art — all of it often updated by his generation's democratic attitude toward information sharing.

In that spirit three invisible works of art — identified by labels only — indicate that Mr. Arcangel has persuaded the Whitney to liberalize gallery conditions. The museum has suspended its prohibition of photography and let Mr. Arcangel boost cellphone reception and introduce Wi-Fi for computers, whose uses are normally verboten. This means that using such devices in the exhibition makes you part of a nominally participatory artwork. It also potentially underscores art as a momentary distraction, photo op or tweeting topic in a world of ever-shortening attention spans.

The show's opening gallery is in many ways the best. The space is dominated by "Various Self Playing Bowling Games (a k a Beat the Champ)," a large-scale video work that asserts a virtual storm of light, noise and flashing images via six cheek-to-jowl projections of video bowling games, from the late 1970s to the 2000s, all altered so that the bowlers throw nothing but gutter balls. The label intones that the piece "highlights the absurdities of simulating a physical experience in a virtual environment" and that the parade of failure "undermines both our expectations of technology and its promise of progress."

But the work's most gripping aspect is its ever-sharper depiction of human emotion; the piece inadvertently mimes a kind of dawning of modern consciousness and existential despair by charting the evolution from the player as a pre-Pac-Man grunt, barely differentiated from the bowling ball itself, to a relatively realistic tantrum thrower, who collapses or pounds the floor after each failed bowl, like one of Mr. Nauman's furious frustrated clowns. The piece is also an anarchic reprise of the buttoned-down anthropological parsings of early-1980s Pictures art, especially 'Richard Prince's sequences of similarly posed models from ads for watches, jewelry or cigarettes.

In an opposite corner "Research in Motion (Kinetic Sculpture #6)" rehearses the old saw about the similarity between modern abstract sculpture and commercial design with a series of "dancing stands" typically used in supermarket displays, but here conjuring, according to the label, the grids of Sol LeWitt. Whatever. The sight of them swiveling silently but weirdly in sync with the tumult of the bowling piece is among the show's nicer moments. Nearby a small monitor flashes and scrolls horizontal bands of intense color, from thick to thin to static, recalling Joan Jonas's early experiments with vertical roll and Paul Sharits's intensely chromatic flicker films.

Punchy abstract color briefly holds sway in the second gallery, where 10 large, bright "Photoshop Gradient Demonstrations" evoke a kind of lurid cross between Color Field painting mistiness and Op Art harshness. As the title implies, these seven-foot-tall prints were made in Photoshop with a few clicks of the mouse, using pixel coordinates that are generously included in the individual titles; anyone can make them. As with the Mario cloud piece, these works bring forward and isolate background motifs, in this case ones that are frequently used in commercial art. Recalling photographs by Thomas Ruff and Mr. Prince, the ensemble makes a nice surround, but it is hard to imagine actually living with one of these hyper-slick pieces.

Similarly it is difficult to imagine that the thousands of people who apparently downloaded Mr. Arcangel's code for hacking the clouds-only version of the Super Mario Brothers game will find much to like in this show. There's too much inside baseball. In one gallery a label informs us about the details of seven new pairs of Oakley M Frame sunglasses on a snazzy display stand: Mr. Arcangel has replaced the frames with painted bronze, seemingly parodying a certain art-world mania for hard-to-discern realistic casting. Nearby 10 boxes for Vizio 55-inch high-definition flat-screen TVs are double-stacked to form a long, low partition. This piece's title, "Volume Management," refers to computer storage systems while also slyly suggesting a new label for Minimalism, with its emphasis on boxy voids of space.

The label reveals that the screens are still in the boxes, conjuring Jeff Koons's early 1980s appropriation sculptures, which consisted of fresh-out-of-the-box 'vacuum cleaners presented in hermetically sealed, expertly lighted Plexiglas vitrines, like the expensive art objects that they soon became. Mr. Arcangel dispenses with the visual formalities, leaving everything to the imagination.

The inadvertent humanism of the bowling piece occasionally reasserts itself, albeit in routine feats of bravura editing. "There's Always One at Every Party" is a compilation, or a "supercut," of all the scenes from "Seinfeld" concerning Kramer's dream of doing a coffee-table book about coffee tables, pulling taut a thematic thread, ripe with Conceptualist self-reference and a kind of artistic delusion, that wandered through several episodes. "Paganini Caprice No. 5" reconstructs the well-known virtuoso work by Niccolò Paganini, the 19th-century violinist and composer, by grabbing individual notes from YouTube videos of amateur heavy-metal guitarists who frequently play the piece as a test of skill; it also creates a sweet, rapid-fire group portrait of music-driven souls whose dreams of stardom rarely materialize.

But too often this show stalls in slight or incomprehensible works: 40 drawings, done with a relatively antique pen-plotter printer, that resemble angular Jackson Pollock scribbles; five innocuous wire sculptures made by computer-operated machines used in the manufacture of metal furniture and display racks; and a final wall painted in the custom-mixed color Jay-Z Blue, a reproduction of the color that, according to the wall label, was "featured on a GMC Yukon Denali S.U.V. displayed at the North American International Auto Show in 2007."

Mr. Arcangel seems guided by a somewhat callow faith in the avant-garde, striving to perpetuate its tradition, dating from Duchamp, of laying claim to new areas of nonart for art's sake. Sometimes he succeeds, but sometimes he falls short, at which point it is perfectly O.K. to reach for your cellphone.

"Cory Arcangel: Pro Tools" runs through Sept. 11 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; (212) 570-3600, whitney.org.