

I Love Screens

Tabor Robak

interviewed by Cecilia Alemani

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Tabor Robak is an artist who operates in the digital realm, but with a craftsman's focus on material aspects, drawing no distinctions between virtual, mental and physical space. In his work, this apparent contradiction is transformed into a kind of generosity towards the viewer.



Cecilia Alemani: *How was growing up and studying in Portland? Did you go to art school? What do you think are the main differences with respect to New York?*

Tabor Robak: Oregon is a beautiful and lush state that smells like wet moss and earth. But growing up there made me appreciate the garbage and grime of New York City. I love that my “backyard” here is a parking space filled with trash.

I went to PNCA. I learned how to think about art and meaning there, but in terms of my technical proficiency, I am mainly self-taught. I have always loved computers. One of my earliest memories is scribbling in black-and-white MacPaint on a seven-inch monitor. I loved diving into a new piece of software, just opening up every toolbar and menu and figuring out what everything did. When we got the Internet, I got into Photoshop tutorials and message boards. Once I read a tutorial on how to turn a lens flare into a shiny bubble in Photoshop 5. Suddenly, something clicked. I realized that each function and filter is just one step in a long process that turns out best when you experiment in unexpected ways.

CA: *Do you do a lot of commercial jobs too? What is the relationship between that and your work presented in an art context?*

TR: I have been doing commercial work since I was 14: design, motion graphics, photo retouching, and illustration. I have worked on projects for everyone from Nike to AT&T. My first paid Photoshop work was removing nipples from images for the Ann Taylor catalog in 2003. But my dream has always been to focus solely on my artwork.

CA: *How was your experience of exhibiting at the Lyon Biennale, in the context of so many other artists using similar aesthetics, like Ed Atkins, Antoine Catala, Trisha Baga, and Helen Marten?*

TR: I used to feel anxious about the imagery I use and the slickness of the execution in my work, because it looks different from what we traditionally think of as fine art. But I’m more confident now, knowing that there is a growing appetite and appreciation for digital work.

CA: *What interests you about working digitally?*

TR: I like thinking about the materiality of digital work. That is why I love screens as opposed to projections, because you can get close and see that tiny flickering pixel. I try to draw attention to the physicality of the screen. For example, I love 1 pixel lines, because they appear so hard and razor-sharp, and they illustrate exactly where those pixels are. Whereas a smooth gradation creates more of a liquid effect. I also like figuring out ways to impart a feeling of warmth and craftsmanship to my work, which can be a challenge with digital media. I want to be generous to the viewer. Sometimes that requires a deliberately excessive aesthetic: opalescent, sparkling and abundant. I want

my work to touch the viewer, like an advertisement, but hopefully with a critical edge.

CA: *What fascinates me about your video work is the relationship between physical and virtual, how do you think of these two extremes in your work?*

TR: I tend not to differentiate between virtual, mental, and physical space, and I see the images I make as a hybrid of them. I think a lot about that moment of immersion when consuming media, when I forget my surroundings and am totally inside of the image. I am still not sure if it is a binary switch or if there is a moment of transformation; either way, it’s beautiful. To really be immersed you have to surrender to the image.

CA: *Can you walk us through the genesis and production of Screen Peeking, the work you exhibited there?*

TR: I originally created the piece for an exhibition with the theme “Empire State.” For me, the main feature of New York is its diversity. The *Grand Theft Auto* game engine randomly generates artificial crowds of human beings, and walking down a busy street in Brooklyn can have a similar effect: an endless stream of people emerging, people of every imaginable type and background. *Screen Peeking* tries to capture that feeling of diversity within a finite extension of space. Each quadrant represents a fantasy or perspective on the world.

To make *Screen Peeking*, I created four real-time 3D virtual environments in Unity. Then I used a virtual camera to capture video of each environment. Many of the objects in the video have been bought or borrowed, rather than created from scratch. Why model a turkey when I can buy one? That leaves me more time to edit the textures and shaders, to get that perfect “golden brown turkey skin” effect.

CA: *What is your relationship with video gaming culture?*

TR: The top-3 “Most Visited” sites on my Google Chrome are Gmail, GameTrailers, and IGN. I play all the top games every year. I am interested in all aspects of the industry from production to management. The great thing about video games is that you can stand in one spot and look around for as long as you want. You can’t do that when you’re watching a movie; the director sets the pace.

I have mixed feelings about the content of current video games. The ideology is often disgusting, and the dialogue is usually horrible. And while I do enjoy watching virtual heads pop off, with a nice red misting of blood, I have to say that shooters are my least favorite genre. There are too many silly conventions; for example, when you’re forced to walk through a long corridor, while a virtual person barks orders at you. I prefer open-world games, in the form of arcade racers, western RPGs, or *Metroidvania*-style adventures. This format places the most emphasis on the gamer’s relationship to the virtual world. In many of them you can even pick flowers!

CA: *What are you planning on showing at Team?*

TR: For my first solo show at Team I am showing 4 new pieces, across 14 screens. All of them combine HD video and real-time, 3D virtual environments.

20XX explores an invented cityscape, made up of my favorite existing skyscrapers. It is inspired by science fiction and cyberpunk. The title nods to a convention in videogames and anime, where dates in the far future are listed as 20XX. The mood is bittersweet.

Algos consists of two videos of roller coasters, each on its own screen, one traveling through interior spaces and the other through exterior spaces. The environments are taken from sourced panoramic photographs, which I have edited extensively in order to make them appear three-dimensional, as well as to remove all instances of human life. It’s a voyeuristic thrill ride.

In a 4-channel piece, *Free-to-Play*, I have programmed and designed a self-playing “match-three” video game, similar to *Bejeweled* and *Candy Crush*. I used a purchased package of two hundred thousand commercial icons which I edited down to seven thousand. I hope that it will be as absorbing and numbing as an iPhone game.

Xenix, a 7-channel video, simultaneously shows the modeling of four different weapons. Here I am interested in the connoisseurship of firearms, as well as their presentation in popular media, particularly video games. While *Screen Peeking* was all about food fantasies, what I’m interested in here are different kinds of weapons, from pipe bombs to the sniper rifles used in *Call of Duty*—and in real-world violence.



Stills from *Screen Peeking*, 2013. Courtesy: the artist and team (gallery, inc.), New York



Stills from *20XX*, 2013. Courtesy: the artist and team (gallery, inc.), New York

Xenix, 2013. Courtesy: the artist and team (gallery, inc.), New York

