

Altered states

In 'NOWN,' artists bend and mold reality to their liking through the use of computers

By Kart Shaw

TRILING-REVIEW ART CRITIC

In a small room on the second floor of Wood Street Galleries, Downtown, four objects — two hammers, a chair and a rotary phone — hover in front of glowing white walls.

At first, they appear to be images on a computer screen that have been dragged and dropped, pulled and pushed, as if by a computer mouse in a graphics program, to such absurdly skewed perspectives that they become comical versions of themselves.

Then slowly, one realizes that these funny-looking, everyday objects are real, absolutely real in every sense. The pea green plastic of the phone is real. The chair is made of actual American rock maple, just like the handles of each hammer, which are made of oak and topped with heads made of cold, hard stainless steel.

Standing before them, with their comically skewed perspectives, these objects seem to oscillate between two and three dimensions. "Basically the reason that they have that phenomenological feeling is because ... what I am applying to a three-dimensional object is a two-dimensional distortion," says their creator, Robert Lazzarini.

Lazzarini is one of more than 10 artists whose work is in the exhibition, "NOWN," on view at Wood Street Galleries. Focusing solely on art that is either inspired by or created through the use of computer animation, the exhibition is a vibrant mix of works in diverse media.

The show was organized by Michelle Thurst, an independent curator from New York City, who says, "NOWN presents animation as not the surreal, but rather as the realization of our perception of time, space, movement and identity through today's advanced technologies."

To that end, Lazzarini's objects are a stunning example. Torn from their original context through the use of a 3-D laser scanner, these hammers, phone and chair have been catapulted into cyberspace, where Lazzarini then altered their perspectives in a 3-D graphics program. Then, using rapid prototyping — a kind of computer-generated model making — the objects were reconstructed into their new forms via 3-D models that were used to make the sculptures.

Viewing the finished results requires a constant readjustment on the part of the viewer, generating a quiet, incomprehensible shock. All at once, they are things that are familiar yet remarkably foreign, even unsettling.

"You approach them on a two-dimensional plane," Thurst says. "Then you can go around them

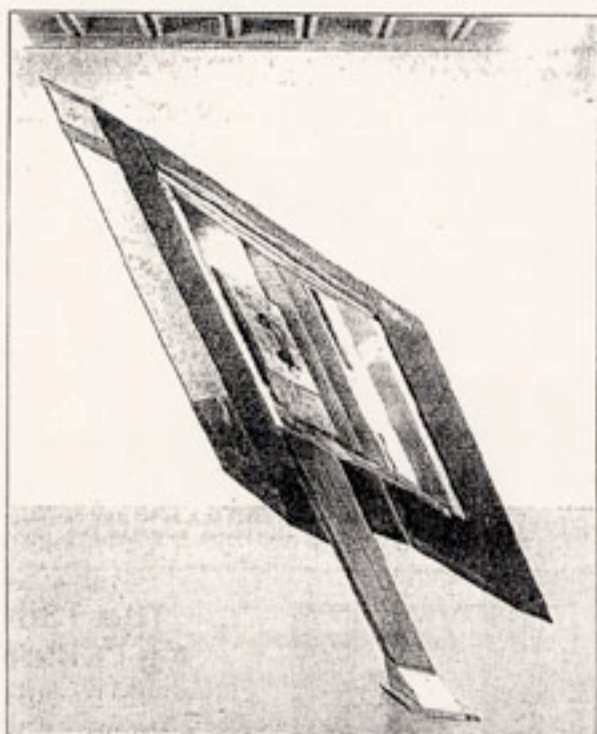


Photo courtesy Wood Street Galleries

Mixing computer images and 3-D works, Robert Lazzarini's "Pay Phone" distorts the perspective viewers use to view the work at "NOWN."

'NOWN'

- ▶ Through March 8, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays; 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays.
- ▶ Wood Street Galleries, 601 Wood St., above the Wood Street T Station, Downtown.
- ▶ (412) 471-5605 or www.pgharts.org/art/woodstreet.cfm.

because they are real objects."

From there, the remaining works in the exhibition explore more digital realities.

With early Nintendo hardware and a cartridge of the computer game "Hogan's Alley," Cory Arcangel has created his own version of a "pop" gun by literally hacking into the game's cartridge. With his new hardware in place, he altered the characters in the shoot-'em-up carnival-style game to look like the pope, Col. Sanders, Flavor Flav, and the real king of pop, Andy Warhol.

Miltos Manetas also used a classic computer game as inspiration, but instead he has chosen scenes from "Doom" to create single still images of "landscapes"



For his "I Shot Andy Warhol" piece, Cory Arcangel hacked into an early Nintendo game cartridge and created his own version with characters that resemble the pope, Col. Sanders, Flavor Flav and Andy Warhol (above).

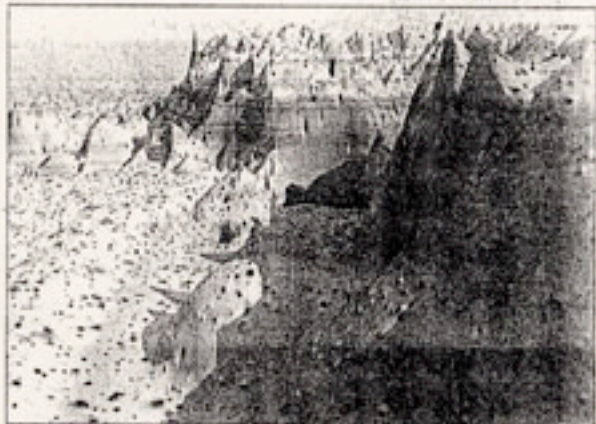
from the digital world depicted in the game. Somewhat similarly, Yael Kanarek created an entire world of landscapes in cyberspace she calls the "World of Awe."

In the exhibition, three large still images of that environment have been hung in the gallery's real space, complete with Kanarek's handwritten script that identifies the ISP addresses and locations of several Web surfers who actually visited her cyber world.

Tobias Bernstrup offers up a Lara Croft for the new millennium with his video piece "In the Dead of Night," which features a female avatar walking the empty streets of a digital city after dark. Void of action-hero bravado, but full of



Miltos Manetas' "After Doom #6," 1997.



Yael Kanarek created a world of landscapes in cyberspace called "World of Awe."

primp and poise, the avatar's delicate skin tones (thanks to scans taken from fashion mags) and sultry demeanor are fit to take any pimply faced 14-year-old computer gamer to the next level.

And speaking of the next level, Michelle Handelman's video piece "The Adventures of Lucky M" on the third floor does just that. In it, "Lucky M" — a superhero-like character played by performance artist Handelman — is clad only with a bright blue wig as she crawls toward the viewer on a floor covered in oddly shaped "candy." The candy looks like a cross between Knox gelatin and Kryptonite, but nevertheless, Handelman gobbles it up slowly as though relishing more the pleasure of onlookers consuming her image rather than her own pleasure in consuming the candy.

Several additional works concentrate more on blurring the line between real and digital space, such as Cráig Kalpakjian's computer-assisted design prints of completely fabricated, but seem-

ingly real, corporate environments, but none are as fun as Kinya "Mumblebeeb" Hanada and Karl Ackermann's interactive piece "Mumblebeeb."

Set up much like a computer game, the video projection piece is a Flash animation that visitors can "move" through via three touch pads placed on the floor in front of it. Although it looks like a computer game, with its colorful graphics and equally colorful characters, Thurst says, "This approaches, moreso, interactive cinema and installation than a game, because there is no strategy." Although that might seem relatively simple in theory, in many ways, the piece underscores the notion that all of these artists are exploring — that increasingly fine line between actual and digital reality. Considering that we might well be deep in the golden age of the computer, this exhibition is well worth exploring.

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"Nown" curated by Michele Thurst, Pittsburgh 2003