

PIN-UP

Magazine for
Architectural Entertainment
Issue 15
Fall Winter 2013/14
USD 15.00

**Plus
67 pages
of Interior
Moments**

**Featuring
Aranda\Lasch,
Maria Pergay,
Steven Holl,
Jon Rafman,
Herman
Hertzberger,
Konstantin
Grcic, Edgar
Allan Poe and
more...**

ISSN 1933-9755



9 771933 975000

Interview by
Stephen Froese

Portraits by
Topical Cream



JON

RAFMAN

Amateur archivist, essayist, ethnographer — these are all titles that have been proposed in attempts to classify the artist Jon Rafman and his polymorphous body of work, as have monikers like gamer, redditor, and fanboy. All describe roles Rafman navigates, sometimes vicariously, throughout his work, moving freely between the digital and the physical, the material and fantasy, exploring memory, identity, and desire. The 32-year-old may have an academic penchant, but his work displays obvious Pop sensibilities, as demonstrated by the ongoing *9-Eyes* series (begun 2009), probably his best-known work, in which he collects “decisive moments” from far corners of Google Street View which are then posted to his Tumblr as well as being mounted on 40 x 64-inch canvases. He also has a growing body of short films, mostly captured in virtual environments like “Second Life” or open-world video games, which have been exhibited in galleries and museums but are also freely available online, alongside working drafts and raw footage he regularly uploads to his personal Vimeo account. And then there are serial works like *New Age Demanded* (begun 2010) — an ongoing collection of digitally created busts that exist both as an online image catalog and in the form of more conventional prints and sculpture — and *Brand New Paint Job* (2010, ongoing), where Rafman virtually shrink-wraps iconic 20th-century paintings by the likes of Picasso and Lichtenstein around CAD models from SketchUp’s 3D Warehouse. After originally presenting them online as JPEGs and video fly-arounds, Rafman has now started to apply such digital surface effects to real-life objects and rooms, coaxing the aesthetic and the functional into an awkward face off. If Rafman seems insouciant about his artworks’ double lives it might be because he sees the boundaries between the virtual and the so-called real dissolving. Indeed Rafman’s oeuvre frequently draws attention to the ways in which this crossover has already become intuitive for us, and how technology is changing not only how we understand and relate to the world around us, but also the ways in which we know ourselves. Or, to put it in his own words, Rafman is carrying forward the tradition of the Romantic explorer into new virtual worlds.

Stephen
Froese

This summer, during the Venice Art Biennale, you built one of the digital interiors from your *Brand New Paint Job* series into a physical room. Going from a digital design to a physical object is standard practice for an architect, but it somehow seems different in this context, especially because the effects produced are so patently digital. What’s at stake for you when your digital work becomes physical?

Jon
Rafman

That’s what I’m trying to figure out by doing these projects. It’s not yet possible to achieve the same degree of immersion with a screen image as you can in real life and so the *O’Keefe Antechamber* [2013] at Palazzo Peckham in Venice was an attempt to create a totally immersive artwork. A lot of my digital images ultimately end up partly functioning as prototypes for real objects, like the 3D-printed *New Age Demanded* busts. The work forces one to reflect on the movement between the real and the virtual, how they bleed into one another. I really appreciated the fact that when

you entered the space at Palazzo Peckham you had the urge to take a picture. We ended up with all of these images that looked like incredible CG renderings of a space but were really just photographs people have taken.



For his project *Brand New Paint Job* (2010, ongoing) Rafman creates 3D models of interiors which he then entirely “shrink-wraps” in staples of 20th-century art, such as this Georgia O’Keefe painting (left). For his installation *O’Keefe Antechamber* at Palazzo Peckham during the 2013 Venice Biennale, Rafman convincingly recreated the previously virtual interior as a physical space (below left).

SF Do you think that the classic distinctions between physical/real and digital/virtual are turning out to be less stable than we thought? Last week a friend sent me an image where this guy had wanted a mountain villa, but he was living in Beijing, so he built a fake mountain on top of an apartment building...

JR ...and the Chinese authorities told him he had to take it down.

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS WITH A MODERN INTERNET EXPLORER

SF Yeah. And it seemed like the kind of thing that should only happen in “Second Life.” Then there’s the Guangzhou Opera House by Zaha Hadid: when the architect Lebbeus Woods first saw photographs of it, he thought they were renderings and wrote about how they had digitally designed this building so that when it was physically built it would resemble a “pure” digital object.

JR Yes, these are perfect examples of what I was aiming at with the installation, but I’m interested in these things on a much more human level. I’m trying to understand what it means for human subjectivity when “Second Life” enters your “first life.” The installation at Palazzo Peckham was partly an attempt to create a space for an experience of art that has been lost. A Beethoven orchestra, for example, may once have been able to convey a totally immersive aesthetic experience that it no longer can today, partly because there

is so much distraction and because our attention spans have transformed. I also think that the attempt to achieve this immersive experience at Palazzo Peckham ultimately failed. But I actually don't mind that failure, because maybe recreating that experience is impossible today and that is what most needed to be revealed.



9-Eyes (2009, ongoing) is Rafman's most widely known work. In it the artist mines the repository of images on Google Street View for rare and unusual moments, like a rogue tiger (3081 Valmont Road, Boulder, Colorado, United States, 2012; 40 x 64 inches) or a napping superhero (*Fuji-Q Highland*, 5-6-1 ShinNishihara, Fujiyoshida, Yamanashi, Japan, 2009; 40 x 64 inches).

SF There is also something interesting about the disjuncts in translation from digital model to physical space, especially in an installation like the one at Palazzo Peckham.

JR I actually think that was one of the aspects in which the project failed — the fact that it became so much about the energy and time it took to build it. I don't like it when labor — how difficult it was to make — becomes the main focus, because it obfuscates the original simplicity of the conceptual gesture, and it just becomes crafty. Sometimes installations can lean too heavily on craft rather than the ideas.

“MANY OF YOUR PROFOUNDEST MOMENTS HAPPEN VIRTUALLY.”

SF Would you rather have it all 3D printed out of the same material?

JR Yes, I think I would. I'd like the work to be as readymade as possible. Digitally skinning an object in a 3D program is a simple process of changing the surface of an object or environment. That's what I like about *Brand New Paint Job*, it walks the line between art and design by forcing High Modernist painting into becoming wallpaper, and in the process realizing one of painting's greatest fears, which is becoming decorative. In the same way the functional room or object becomes somewhat useless in having itself covered and being turned into an art object. It's also a comment on the nature of the relationship between art and design, and how important design is to art. Design is a huge part of the art vernacular — even though it's deconstructed and used in anti-design ways — especially for my generation, where people are using and appropriating branding techniques

and corporate aesthetics. It's almost troll like: on one level I'm trolling the paintings and on another level I'm trolling interior-design chic as a concept.

SF Speaking of craft, you said something similar about your Google Street View photo series *9-Eyes* — how the amount of time it takes to find the images isn't something you want associated with the value of the work. But isn't the time spent lost in these worlds a really important element of the work?

JR Time is important in my work, but more as a concept — memory, time, and how you capture time passing. But I don't like it when it's framed as a “freakish” amount of time. It's more about time and obsession, and I guess because my work deals with obsession there is a freak quality to it, but I don't like it to be the only thing that's discussed. I'm curious about how new technologies both change and reveal how we experience time. The *9-Eyes* series hit such a deep chord that it went mainstream. But on the blogs people would often emphasize the time spent collecting the images over the content of the images themselves. There can be a popular attitude that if a work took years to make it must implicitly be a better work. I don't like those aspects to be the reason why a work is valuable. Nowadays, I don't search for all the images myself, I hire people to search for a lot of them. But I still think that a good image is a good image, however long it took to find.

SF But in another sense, a lot of the virtual spaces you explore in your work, like “Second Life,” are places that people have constructed to spend much of their time in, as an augmentation of or an escape from the real world — or do you even think we can still talk about these as separate places?

JR It's definitely blurred. If so much of your life is online, or in front of a screen, and so many of your profoundest moments are happening “virtually,” I think they need to be looked at with a certain amount of respect. Those moments are still real even though they're happening online. There is still something physical to the experience, it's just different. A major crux of my work is how these virtual worlds not only change the way we interact with our landscape and our environment, but also how we experience and remember the past.



A 2013 installation view of “You Are Standing in an Open Field,” Rafman's first solo exhibition in New York at Zach Feuer Gallery. In the foreground is *Plaque* (2013), a 48 x 60 x 0.5-inch slab of engraved granite that lists the “death” of two shopping malls in New York State.

SF Can you give an example of that?

JR I think it's important to be aware of what's been lost, or the things that are soon going to be lost. In my recent show at Zach Feuer [“You Are Standing in an Open Field,” 2013] there was a piece called *Plaque* that draws an analogy between stories about the last days of two virtual worlds — “EverQuest Online Adventures” and “City of Heroes” — and

stories about the death of two shopping malls in New York State. The truth is that the virtual and the physical world are fused together at all times, and both these malls and the video games were huge virtual worlds. But because they are so banal and have seemingly little historical value, they are not really archived or taken seriously except by the population for which they were important. Those are the types of environments and locations I'm most interested in.



Two stills from the 2013 music video Rafman created for "Still Life (Betamale)," a track by Brooklyn-based experimental musician Daniel Lopatin and his band Oneohtrix Point Never. Much of the video's imagery is culled from Rafman's excursions into the virtual world of furry fandom, a subculture with sexual interest in fictional anthropomorphic animal characters.

SF On several occasions you've referred to yourself as an anthropologist, in addition to being an artist. What do you mean by that?

JR I have an interest in finding the past in the present and following the legacy of the Romantic tradition today and seeing how in video games or on the Internet a lot of these traditions live on. It relates to my interest in virtual exploration as connected to the figure of the Romantic explorer. I'm interested in how these new worlds change culture at large, but culture is such a huge thing that I'd rather focus on very specific subcultures, in the tradition of Walter Benjamin and ethnography in general. You can learn a lot by looking at extremely marginal cultures and cultural objects in society. The more marginal, the more ephemeral, the culture is, the more fleeting the object is, I think the more it can actually reflect and reveal "culture at large."

SF Did you always know you were going to end up working as an artist? Because before doing your Master of Fine Arts at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago you also studied philosophy and literature at McGill.

JR I did know I wanted to be some sort of an artist, but I was more thinking of being a filmmaker and creating narratives. During my undergraduate studies I would try to convince my professors to let me hand in short movies instead of final papers. And sometimes I'd convince them. But I kind of got that out of my system. In fact, the films are so bad and amateur that I plan on somehow incorporating them into my practice.

SF Can you say more about the films?

JR They were narratives inspired by literature courses I was taking at the time. All my friends were in them, and the acting was awful. Later, when I went to art school, it wasn't the gallery world but the indie film world I was thinking

about as the type of industry I would have to deal with to make my work.

SF How do those early films relate to the films you're making now?

JR Those early films were more essayistic and I was heavily influenced by Hollis Frampton, Chris Marker, and Alain Robbe-Grillet... and whatever else I was watching at the Video Data Bank in Chicago. But that was definitely the beginning of my current artistic practice, and I'm still continuing that project.

"MY PROCESS BEGINS WITH SURFING THE INTERNET TO THE POINT OF SICKNESS."

SF When you were growing up, were you a part of any of the Internet or video-game subcultures that you're exploring in your work now?

JR I grew up pre-Internet — I'm from the generation that experienced the transformation. And I think I'm lucky to have witnessed the change. I did play a lot of video games though, but I would never consider myself anywhere close to the level of one of these professional gamers. I just played a little bit more than the average kid at the time. I'm also an only child, so I would construct these vast fantasy worlds, and wanted to share them, but I guess I didn't have the right friend group. I went to a pretty conservative Jewish elementary and high school and nobody wanted to play dungeons and dragons with me. It was a lot easier to get people to play video games, but I wouldn't consider myself a true gamer, even though I kind of wanted to be one. I think that's where the anthropologist element in my work comes from: I don't feel totally part of the culture, but I definitely have a profound empathy and desire to know more about it.



Rafman foraged motifs from Hudson River School paintings to create the covers of fictional DVDs in an effort to underline their similarities with virtual video-game environments. A selection of them were presented during his 2013 solo show at Zach Feuer Gallery in New York.

SF How do you end up getting into these different subcultures, like the fetish cultures you explored for the Still Life "(Beta Male)" music video [2013] for Oneohtrix Point Never with all the furry and troll cave imagery?

JR My process begins with surfing the Internet to the point of sickness, where it feels like I'm about to lose my mind sitting in front of the computer for so long. I'm not saying this is a good thing, this is just how it's happened thus far. Through my surfing I reached this site called GUR0chan, it's a 4chan-type site, but specifically dealing with the most extreme and obscure fetishes. It mostly contains drawings and a /lit/ section where people write these crazy stories

that you wouldn't even believe, about fetishes you never imagined existed. There's this moment at the climax of the film where there's an enormous accumulation of this violent fetish imagery. I was trying to express the feeling of sensory overload after surfing the deep Internet and consuming so many images. I was also pulling texts from these sites all summer long, and eventually I synthesized it and started realizing that what I was doing maybe didn't need to be as ambitious as I initially planned. Then I started erasing certain elements and so it became a process of removal. Originally I was trying to make the film in the style of a BBC or PBS anthropology documentary, one of those ten-part educational programs from the 70s. But it ended up more like an early Jean Rouch film that oscillates between documentary and fiction.

“I’VE LEARNED TO EMBRACE HOW MY WORK CAN TRAVEL BETWEEN CULTURAL SPHERES.”

SF Were you also posting on GUROchan while you were doing research?

JR I didn't post on GUROchan, but I did try to get into the headspace of the fetishist. It reaches a point where you just can't identify with some of the fetishes. But I did start to understand a bit more what might be appealing about being a furry.

SF What is that?

JR There is a video of a fox furry drowning in mud, and when I first saw that image it captured something profound, and in way it seemed liked a symbol of the present. It's funny because I actually discovered it for the first time about six years ago and it stuck with me so deeply. There's both something erotic or sensual, and something unsettling about it. It feels like the fox is trapped in quicksand and being sucked down, but it also seems really cozy, and I want to be covered in all that mud.



Franz Kline Kawasaki *Ninja* (2012) is part of the *Brand New Paint Job* series and shows motorcycles that Rafman treated with an add-on surface of canonized works of art. The installation view is from Rafman's 2012 exhibition "MMXII BNPJ" at American Medium Gallery in New York.

SF There's one last thing I want to ask you: I heard a story that Kanye West flew you out to London to meet with him...

JR I don't know how much I can say about this on the record, but this is the story: Kanye contacted me through his manager, and said he wanted to start a creative dialogue. And I met him, and in the process I also met Will Smith, and Zaha Hadid was there too. Kanye and Will were sitting on these beautiful throne chairs.

SF What had everyone been assembled to talk about?

JR It was more like, "Let's get to know each other," but in a semi-formal setting and with everybody's entourages. It was a surreal moment and I felt like I was in a modern-day court. You know, the equivalent of a Medici court in the Renaissance, or maybe a bit more like Louis XIV — but not the home base of the court, more like a traveling court, and I was a visiting dignitary.



Two stills from the 3:57-minute-long *Woods of Arcady* video (2010) which documents scenes from the virtual environment "Second Life." The work's title is taken from of William Butler Yeats's 1889 poem *The Song of the Happy Shepherd*.



SF How did it feel to be a part of this contemporary court?

JR It felt like I could've been in "Second Life" and Kanye, Will, Zaha, and I were avatars. The celebrity world is like a virtual world, and I actually experienced it for a fleeting moment. This experience helped me realize that I'm in an interesting position in the art world because several of my projects appeal to a mainstream audience. A lot of artists think that if anyone can appreciate the work it can't be "deep" enough. But I've learned to embrace how my work can travel between different cultural spheres, how it can move between *Contemporary Art Daily* and the *Daily Mail*.

PLATES — pages 90–91, 94–95

- 1 *New Age Demanded (Draped Dubuffet)* (2011); archival print; 58 x 42 inches; courtesy of Jon Rafman Studios.
- 2 *Rosenquist Jeopardy Set* (2013); archival print mounted on dibond; 36 x 48 inches; courtesy of Zach Feuer Gallery, New York.
- 3 *Giacomo Balla 50s Living Room* (2013); archival print mounted on dibond; 30 x 36 inches; courtesy of Zach Feuer Gallery, New York.
- 4 *Picasso Everybody Loves Raymond Set* (2013); archival print mounted on dibond; 36 x 48 inches; courtesy of Zach Feuer Gallery, New York.
- 5 *Lichtenstein Pub* (2013); archival print mounted on dibond; 36 x 48 inches; courtesy of Zach Feuer Gallery, New York.
- 6 *New Age Demanded (Mishmash Dekooning)* (2012); archival pigment print; 58 x 42 inches; Courtesy of Jon Rafman Studios.

JON RAFMAN







2



3





4



5



