WHERE DOES THE GAME END AND WHERE DOES REAL LIFE BEGIN

An Interview with Justin Berry

By *Danni Shen*
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How does one construct an aestheticized environment in which to "kill"? What does it mean to create human-like avatars and architectural structures, shifting their proportions into tools of violence? For artist Justin Berry, whose practice involves mining video game virtual realities, there's something telling about these arenas in which values are mutable and shift-able. Today, when even social media, which the artist argues is itself virtual reality and thus reality, platforms such as Instagram or Facebook that exist as spaces where we meet our life partners and have major events that occupy even our dreams and nightmares, have become worlds which are not necessarily graphically virtual, but increasingly emotionally virtual. According to Berry, with the increasing virtualization and gamification of real world situations, the choices we make in these realities impact our understanding of the everyday, and become part of the methodology by which we engage simulated as well as physical space. As the walls between the virtual and the real are blurring, and in some ways fading entirely, understanding these game worlds and how they affect our senses and values has become imperative.

I sat down with Berry in his most recent solo exhibition at Essex Flowers gallery to discuss the complexities of virtual realities of war, photography, survival, flower picking in cyberspace, to Trump's presidential campaign, and more.

Danni Shen: Video games exist in real time and space, yet play out within collapsed, immaterial, colonized, engineered dimensions. Do you see video games as "worlds" or "realities" onto themselves?

Justin Berry: If there was a thesis to the work I'm making, it would be that these virtual worlds are no different from these other worlds that we inhabit, such as the "natural" or the "human". These divisions that we create are arbitrary divisions that we use to navigate these spaces as a way of having agency within them. I would say that when you go to a place, you have a language by which you understand it. Two people coming from different backgrounds are going to experience the same space in fundamentally different ways. I think that's one of the things that leads to conflict, and one of the things I'm interested in is this methodology through which we also engage the virtual world. I don't think it's separate from the real world.

I think it is a part of the real world, and that when we go play a game, we are not going somewhere else. The whole time, we are situated firmly in this same shared reality. We navigate these virtual worlds as though they are these free moral sanctuaries where we can act out our fantasies and our fears, where our actions have no weight or relevance. But as the boundaries between our expectations and uses of the virtual world grow closer and closer to the real world, I feel that isolation of our virtual experience is no longer a safe space. Our choices there have meaning and impact our understanding of the real world, and become part of the methodology by which we engage the physical and virtual. There's this idea called immersion. Without it, you can't have an emotional connection to the subject matter. But it also has drawbacks.

Immersion is that moment when you're playing the game, and the experience is so deep that you're experiencing something raw on a real level. You play the game, the credits roll, take a deep breath. You realize you're thirsty, your eyeballs ache from staring at the screen, and there's this return to the real as it were. Only when you come out of immersion that you are able to ask, what did I just experience? Was it interesting, meaningful, worth doing? As an artist, there's this challenge of both maintaining immersion, but not making something so immersive, that it becomes a kind of trap from which you cannot escape. I spend a lot of time on this edge, where I enter a game while maintaining enough distance that I'm employing a level of criticality.

White Point (Installation View), 2015, Live Projection, Panotour, Mice, Pedestals, Dimensions Variable, Courtesy of the artist

DS: How do you find that your gaming experiences filter into the everyday?

JB: As an anecdote, I did this project where I was playing Skyrim a lot. Skyrim, for those that don't know, is an RPG (role-playing game). It's a vast open-world game. You can spend time doing anything that you want. You can raise levels just by picking flowers in fields. I was on a road trip once with my wife going to Nova Scotia. As I was looking out the window, I go "wow, look at all that lavender on the roadside!" And she goes "what lavender?" I then realized I knew many of the flowers growing around me because I had been gathering them as ingredients in Skyrim. So I had this knowledge gained from the game that had filtered over my perception of the real world. That was a major revelation for me.

With this idea of where does the game end, and where does real life begin, I would point out the gamification of real world situations. For example, corporate strategies found to be successful at getting workers to work more efficiently. It's easy to look at the big money people on Wall Street and say that these guys are destroying everything. I would imagine that most of them are not making some cynical decision that other people's lives don't matter, it's that when they're immersed within a system, they lack the perspective to know the difference. This numerical construct of the market is such a good game, that when immersed within it, you're just making the moves, getting the points, punching the numbers. It becomes so abstract that you're not considering them tied to the real world. What we think of as fundamentally real, our lives, our jobs, are in many ways organized through game-like constructions.

Gradient, 2013, Archival Inkjet Print, 18x24 inches (frame with matte), 12x15 inches (image), Courtesy of the artist.

DS: As SCREEN's half year's editorial theme is on "survival", what do you think about the notion of survival in relationship to your work?

JB: In the war games that I've played, everywhere you were, was a contested place where people were trying to kill you. I'd be trying to shoot the shot over here, and meanwhile there are people running at me with guns where I had 15 seconds to get that shot, and it took me a hundred tries. They're firing at me. I'm facing the opposite direction trying to go out and take the picture. Then you get shot and you're still taking the picture but your blood's on the screen. So in many ways these pictures are all seen through the lens of surviving the act of taking them.

DS: Have you always been interested in photography, and the history of photography?

JB: My background is not in photography. It's something I came to through strange means. At first when I was looking at Ansel Adams, and also specifically at Robert Adams's Light Balances. I think it's less about the history of photography and more as I was learning to look at photography for the first time, that was the body of work that hit me hard. I thought, I really get this. This is amazing. In some ways I'm a terrible photographer. One of the things I struggle with has always been the ability to see the world as it is, rather than as I personally see it in a given time.

For example, I go on a hike up a mountain, warmed by the early day sun, there's butterflies in the distance. As I look out over the hill, I see a faint sheen of mist as the dew is evaporating. I'm just mesmerized. I take out my camera, smell the flowers, and take a picture. Then I come home, look at the image and I'm not sure, is that a hill? All of that experiential information is

lost in the process of taking a photograph. I think that great photographers have an ability to see the world as the camera sees it. So in a weird way, these games have given me the tools to be a photographer. Now I'm obsessed with photography because in these worlds, what you see on the screen is directly what is. There is no act of translation. I think it's important that I'm learning here as opposed to the physical world. I'm not operating from a position of baggage where I got a photographic practice and I'm trying to translate onto this other context. I'm discovering the photographic project purely within this context, which is exciting
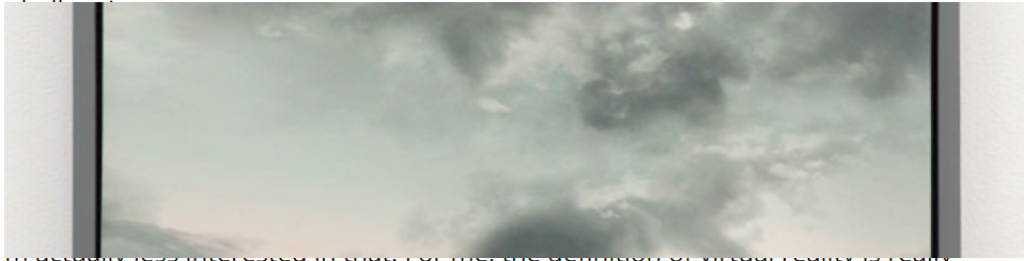
JB: I'm actually less interested in that. For me, the definition of virtual reality is really something that is expansive. I do think that Twitter, 4chan, Facebook, Instagram, DeviantArt, are all virtual realities. These are places that we go and we pretend to be someone similar to ourselves but not ourselves, and the experiences we have there are not necessarily what's important in that you can smell it or feel it on your forearm, it's because you actually think you're there.

For example, if someone likes me on Instagram do they like me? You think psht, of course there's a difference and we all know it's obviously this number on a screen. But actually I don't believe that. I think it's a thing that we tell ourselves to make ourselves more comfortable with the more complicated reality that we do get emotional and meaningful satisfaction out of these exchanges. Instead of just saying oh this isn't just a game I'm playing, this is actually me. But it's also a game you're playing, and if you understand it as so, it can be empowering and rewarding. But when you don't recognize it as a game, you are subject to its altered way of seeing the world, and that alternative set of values. That's what I talked about earlier, when you become really immersed you have this deep emotional connection, but you have this pathological inability to make sense of it. You're in it. You can't see it from a distance for what it is.
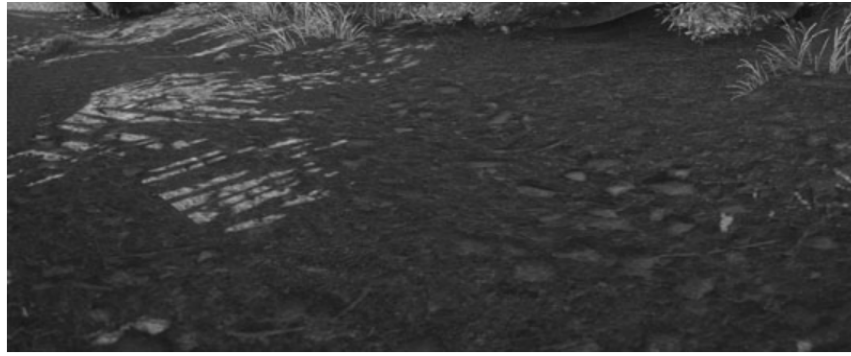
Zephyr, 2015, Archival Inkjet Print, 18x24 inches (frame with matte), 12x15 inches (image), Courtesy of the artist.

DS: And we're traveling through image saturated landscapes all the time, more than ever before.

JB: That relationship to imagery and the world is tied to what I see as this increasing virtualization. We can't always successfully tell what is virtual and what is a real experience. I would say a piece of evidence for that is Donald Trump's presidential bid. People think they're voting on a character on a TV show and don't realize it's the actual world. It's important because we live in a society where someone so fundamentally untrue, is someone people feel they can believe in.

Part of the reason it's so much easier to believe in him rather than someone who's actually being honest, is because we have so effectively distanced ourselves from these literal interpretations of the world. What he's saying as a form of truth is actually more convincing than the actual truth. Because we spend more time looking at fictions, they feel more comfortable, more believable. Part of what this practice is about, is looking at the virtual or fictional, not as the virtual or as the fictional, but looking at these with the same concern and attention that we would look at the real world, and holding it to a very similar level of accountability. As these fictions become more closely tied to our realities, our ability to objectively and actively break down or understand fictional spaces is something we will need to move forward.

Justin Berry lives and works in New York. His work has been exhibited nationally including at CAVE, Detroit, MI; CUAC, Salt Lake City, UT; Barbara Davis Gallery, Houston, TX; Chelsea Art Museum and Interstate Projects in New York, NY as well as various international venues in London, Strasbourg, and Peru. His work has been featured and reviewed in publications such as Frieze, Hyperallergic, L Magazine, Pin-Up magazine and Media-N.

Website of Justin Berry

Justin Berry at Essex Flowers

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