

Can video games inspire serious art? Akron Art Museum answers with a resounding yes

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AKRON, Ohio – Modern and contemporary art have long had an elitist aura as a form of highbrow intellectual entertainment for the cognoscenti – insiders in the know.

So what would a truly populist art look like at a 21st century moment when populism, like it or not, is a major driving force in politics and culture? Such was my gratitude that I hadn't done my homework before visiting Fishman's show at Vielmetter. The New York-based artist is 80 and has had a highly distinguished career, but her work was only vaguely familiar to me. Her last solo show in L.A. was 15 years ago, and I had seen only a smattering of pieces in group exhibitions. I felt shamefully late to the game and yet exhilarated to be discovering just what a vital game she is playing.

The Akron Art Museum, perhaps more than any other Northeast Ohio fine arts institution, has been trying to pose some constructive answers to that question.

"Open World: Video Games & Contemporary Art," the current major exhibition, reflects that adventurous strain in the museum's DNA. It surveys the ways in which contemporary artists are making work inspired by and in many cases resembling video games.

"Open World" refers specifically to games that enable a player to navigate freely within a virtual reality created by the game designer, whether it's a tropical jungle or a battlefield.

Contemporary artists are clearly inspired by such artificial realities, and are eager to turn the technologies and aesthetics of video games to their own purposes.

On view in the show are sinister and hyperreal color inkjet prints of Las Vegas and decaying portions of Philadelphia and Camden, NJ., by St. Louis artist Tim Portlock that convey an almost unbearable gloom and doom.

There's a black comedy set piece on gun violence by Joseph DeLappe of Dundee, Scotland, in which civilians armed with high-powered automatic weapons slaughter each other on the streets of an archetypal U.S. city, as Kate Smith sings "God Bless America" on the soundtrack.

And there are pieces that celebrate the colorful and cartoony retro look of early video games from





the Pac Man days in the 1980s, including Chinese artist Feng Mengbo's cheeky "Long March: Re-start," 2008, in which a member of the Red Army lobs cans of Coca Cola at various obstacles.

Issues of race and gender are explored in the show, along with the visual phenomenology of gaming technology.



"Boat," by Tim Portlock, archival pigment print.

In "Taliban Hands," 2011, DeLappe extracted the dimensions of the hands of a Taliban fighter from the 2010 video game "Medal of Honor." He then used those measurements to create large, corrugated plastic sculptures of the hands, which are set on a gallery floor like fragments of ancient classical sculptures of the

kind displayed in museums in Rome and Athens.

You can also participate in the show's offerings by playing the 2002 "I Shot Andy Warhol" video game, by New York artist Cory Arcangel, by or strapping on a virtual reality headset to enter "Skinsuits," a 2019 work by Rachel Rossin, who participated in the Cleveland Institute of Art's 2018 show on digital art, "Portals Thresholds."

The Rossin piece in Akron creates the illusion that your body has taken on the skins of humanoid creatures in actual video games.

Expertly organized by Theresa Bembnister, the museum's curator of exhibitions, the show is the latest statement from a heartland institution eager to explore ideas that might be considered on the fringe from a classic fine arts perspective, but which clearly resonate with a great many people.

The "Open World" exhibition and catalogue point out that some 65 percent of American adults play video games, and that at least some artists are part of that group. Moreover, the game industry generated nearly \$135 billion in revenue in 2018, surpassing movie tickets threefold, according to the website gamesindustry.biz.

Other examples of the open-minded stance displayed by the Akron Art Museum in "Open World" include its 2017 exhibition on artworks produced for High Fructose, the Bay Area magazine devoted to bizarre and outlandish fantasy art.

Then too, there was the 2016 show devoted to the art of Akron native and Devo co-founder Mark



Mothersbaugh, which the museum shared with the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland.

Reaching even further back, to 2007, it was the Akron museum that signed on to host a national touring exhibition on the paintings of Norman Rockwell, something no other regional museum would have done.

Of course, the museum has hosted exhibitions on classic, mainstream contemporary artists such as El Anatsui, Nick Cave and Jun Kaneko.

But the institution is clearly eager to engage a broad audience, without pandering. We're not talking here about exhibitions on Star Wars costumes and the like.

Participants in the show include Bill Viola, a pioneering video artist whose work has been shown and collected by museums around the world.

Mengbo's "Long March" is on loan from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Ueli Alder's "Untitled Detonation #1-8," 2011, a series of inkjet prints depicting hyperreal images of fireball explosions, inspired by video games, is on loan from Cleveland's Fred and Laura Ruth Bidwell Foundation.

Bembnister's show makes the point that collectors, galleries and museums are taking art inspired by video games very seriously.

Yet if there's a caveat about digital art, or art inspired by video games, it would involve the cool, smooth, homogenized non-tactile artificiality of the artistic worlds inspired by the new technology. The show leaves you hungering for art with a human touch, made by hand.

There's also a sense in which digital visual technology has advanced to the point where it can be hard to create a wow factor.

A case in point is Tabor Robak's "20XX," a 2013 video depicting the skyline of a futuristic city inspired by Hong Kong, Las Vegas and Times Square, in which fireworks burst and the screen through which you view the scene ripples like water.

The work takes illusionism to mesmerizing heights never envisioned by artists in the Renaissance. So where do you go after that? What's the next visual high for digital art or art inspired by video games?

"Open World" can't answer that question. But it suggests that anyone who ignores the kind of work on view in Akron would miss out on something truly important – and popular – in contemporary culture.

"Open World: Video Games & Contemporary Art" at Akron Art Museum, 1 S. High St., Akron, through Sunday, Feb. 2

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