

22 April – 28 May 2021

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Artist Gregory Bennett describes his imagined worlds as existing in a constant state of ‘nowness’.¹ Created in 3D animation software, these worlds run on infinite loops, turning and churning in apparent unawareness or disregard for the camera. They are complex and indeterminate, yet ultimately they are also closed systems “subject to the repetition compulsion of the loop, always returning and repeating, but retaining a mesmerising and habitual fascination.”² Emerging from an infinite black void, they drift in and out of view, and appear to go on forever. Yet what forces drive the actors and structures of these realms are a matter of speculation.

The artist notes that the term ‘edifice’ can refer to both a large, imposing building, and a complex system of beliefs.³ In this exhibition, we encounter vast and variable architectures – towers, platforms, spheres, domes and zones – through which structures of desire and thought are alluded to. These environments and their inhabitants appear to obey their own commands. Or do they?

Bennett describes himself as collaborating with the software he employs to produce his work.⁴ Autodesk Maya is central to big budget video effects used in the motion picture industry, much of which is now created and composited in virtual 3D environments. Bennett’s work, however, is no immaculately rendered blockbuster, promising immersion in filmic realism, in universes perhaps conversely populated by superheroes motivated by comic book narratives. Bennett is more Brechtian, foregrounding the visual vocabulary of contemporary 3D animation tools, and celebrating the visible artifice of his constructions and their potential in the context of contemporary art. In addition to more traditional keyframe animation techniques, such software also allows for generative, indeterminate possibilities when instructions and parameters are set – and it is left to run itself. In such complicated co-creation one might ask, where does animation end and animism begin?

Animism attributes a living soul to humans, plants, inanimate objects and natural phenomena. Such philosophical frameworks are underpinned by a belief in a supernatural power that organises and animates the material universe. Many of the objects of Bennett’s work display behaviour with levels of what we might call ‘intelligence’ – or programmed by one. Clouds of paint, for example, circle human forms as if sentient, and are often rendered in the same colour. These digital objects act independently, yet are also governed by parameters set by both the artist and the software platform. The resulting systems are repeating yet unstable, locked in a dance between freedom and control.

These tensions also point towards the artist’s longstanding interest in ambiguities between utopian and dystopian representations. We might think of Hieronymus Bosch, Dante’s *Inferno*, the myth of Sisyphus, Michel Foucault’s reflections on power and the panopticon. We might also think of spaceships, laboratories, forests, gardens, databases, artificial intelligence, science fiction, the de-individualised figures of Edward Burne-Jones, the work of Eadweard J. Muybridge, the paradoxes of M.C. Escher, the camp choreography of Busby Berkley, Jake and Dinos Chapman and contemporary digital video games.

¹ Gregory Bennett, “Impossible Choreographies: The Database as a Creative Tool,” *The Journal of Creative Technologies* 7 (2017): 32, Auckland University of Technology, <https://doi.org/10.24135/jct.v0i7.42>

² Ibid.

³ Gregory Bennett, interview by Emil McAvoy, April 12, 2021.

⁴ Ibid.

Bennett may be seen to play a kind of God in the creation of his worlds, yet he also inhabits these environments as a subject. A generic male figure is a key recurring motif in Bennett's practice. At one level, the figure stands in for the artist himself.⁵ In this context, autobiographical dimensions could be read into the work. Complicating this, the figure is also a readily downloadable asset, a kind of digital readymade. In this sense, we might consider Bennett in relation to traditions and trajectories in sculpture, just as we may through the lens of cinema.

Further, this generic figure is multiplied into the formation of crowds who act both independently and collectively. Their movement is guided by both data sets (the 'found'), and that recorded by Bennett in Auckland University of Technology's Motion Capture Lab. Whether the figures are involved in apparent prayer, exercise, argument, violence or other actions, in the resulting video works the 'real' and the simulated are indistinguishable. The hand of the artist is present here, but not as one might expect. In works such as *Embowered* (2021), this figure is morphed into composite creatures within ornate ecosystems. Men spin, flex, fold and turn inside out like plants, insects or sea creatures. In *Edifice II* (2021), they hang up their skin entirely.

If these surreal architectures are machines for living, perhaps their occupants are also the ghosts that haunt them. We see repeated vocabularies of body movement which communicate meaning beyond facial expression, as they might in dance, for example. Yet which desires, subjectivities and beliefs program these actions? And who is really in control of them?

The answer appears to be open-ended. In Bennett's uncanny worlds, all is brimming with life – and all is entangled in perpetual motion. The story is always rewriting itself.

Emil McAvoy
April 2021

⁵ Ibid.