EXHIBITION REVIEW

Petra Cortright: Niki, Lucy, Lola, Viola
DEPART FOUNDATION
LOS ANGELES
JULY 9–SEPTEMBER 19, 2015

Ben Jones X 8
ACE GALLERY
BEVERLY HILLS
JULY 11–SEPTEMBER 30, 2015

Casey Reas: Linear Perspective
CHARLIE JAMES GALLERY
LOS ANGELES
SEPTEMBER 5–OCTOBER 17, 2015

For the post-internet generation, using appropriated content is commonplace. The proliferation of images, sounds, texts, and fashions available online has come to be regarded as the subject matter of daily life and always there for reuse. In an interview with Marisa Olson for Rhizome.org, Christiane Paul remarked on the practice of many artists working in the digital medium:

> They may create online projects but they might also do object-based art, paintings or sculptures that are deeply informed by or use elements of the net or its "language," which is what the term postinternet tries to capture. . . . (Sadly I now frequently see postinternet used as a catchy term for art made by anyone born roughly after 1985 or for a sensibility characterized by an uncomplicated reverence for fame and success.)[1]

Post-internet has in many ways become a kind of catch-all phrase for artists working in the digital realm, or making mixed-media works from appropriated sources. This broad use of the term pushes it past the breaking point, where it becomes so open-ended as to be meaningless. A better definition of post-internet art is that it not only uses the internet as a point of departure, but that it is technology (software/computer) dependent.

The work of Los Angeles-based artists Petra Cortright, Ben Jones, and Casey Reas can be examined in this light. All have recently created large-scale installations of projected imagery, and while their projects are conceptually and visually diverse, they are all aware of the importance of an immersive experience. Their use of software in creating an aesthetic aligned with the principles of abstraction also ties them together.

The subject of Reas's installation *Linear Perspective* at Charlie James Gallery was the mass media: newspapers, broadcast television, and social networks. The title piece, *Linear Perspective*, is Reas's latest software-based work, an ever-mutating collection of images from the front page of the *New York Times* in 2015. In the digital age, what does the front-page photograph connote? In the printed edition, it refers to the image "above the fold" that is used to sell the paper. Reas repurposes and digitally manipulates one image each day that is representative of that day's headline news. In the darkened space, elongated digital brushstrokes emanate

from a fixed point at the edge of a large wall, moving across it to create a shape reminiscent of a sideways funnel or an old-fashioned hearing aid. Each stroke reveals a new abstracted and distorted version of the original, and their accumulation will become a visual archive of the year. Reas adds to the work daily and plans to do so until the end of 2015. The silent computer-generated animation offers no critical or insightful perspective on the imagery or its content as it gracefully glides across the wall. Reas's custom software distorts the original rectangular shape of the source image, morphing it into a narrow wavy horizontal stroke. In two complementary monitor-based works, rather than use one image per day to represent a year, Reas created software-generated animations from all the images in a single day's edition. Titled *Today's Ideology* and accompanied by each edition's date (*July 19, 2015*) and (*August 23, 2015*), these generative works cycle through the images, forming an ever-changing pattern of horizontal and diagonal brushstrokes or stripes. These pieces are Reas's first to use "readable," recognizable, imagery.

Also included in the exhibition were past works that used broadcast media as source material, transforming those signals into abstracted compositions. In works such as *KTTV (August 2015)* and *https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=adventuretime (30 July 2015)*, Reas created custom software that abstracts the audio and video content of broadcast television. He has also used his Twitter feed as source material. The resulting monitor-based works feature pulsating, colorful patterns akin to digital noise, presenting these different aspects of mass media as a series of unreadable yet visually engaging fragments.

Reas mines popular culture in ways similar to Nam June Paik, transforming everyday information into dynamic artworks. His awareness of the history of digital media informs his decisions, yet he also speaks of the influence of conceptual artists such as Sol LeWitt. While his aesthetic proclivity is abstract, it is an informed and intellectual pursuit using software to read and interpret the signals of our everyday digital existence.

Jones, a former member of the net.art collective Paper Rad, is also a multimedia artist and animator for the Cartoon

Installation view of *Dragon Ping Pong Table* (2015) by Ben Jones; courtesy Ace Gallery Beverly Hills
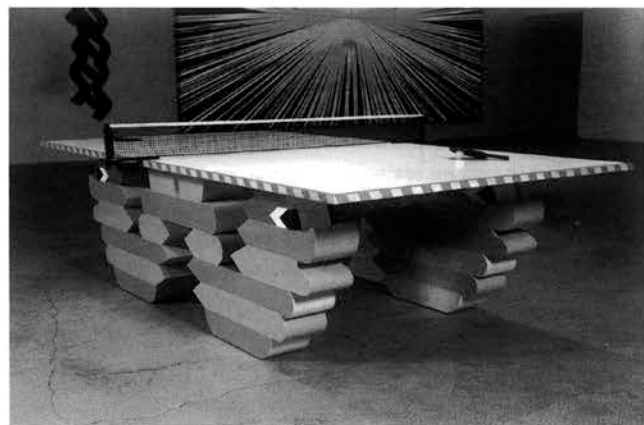
Network, Fox TV, and most recently for Animation Domination High-Def (ADHD). Needless to say, his commercial work and fine art intersect. While his commercial works are narrative, his artworks gravitate toward abstraction, yet similar methodologies and techniques are used in their creation. His animations, made using Adobe Flash and After Effects, feature simple geometric patterns that pulsate across the screen. These densely layered loops have no beginning or end. Though Jones makes evocative single-channel animations, they become more powerful through juxtaposition. His installations are often multimedia spectacles consisting of objects, paintings, and projections. The overall effect is like entering Pee-wee's Playhouse or

Installation view of *Linear Perspective* (2015) by Casey Reas; courtesy the artist and Charlie James Gallery

a Neo Geo environment surrounding the viewer with a cacophony of visual information. Jones has succeeded in expanding his screen-based net.art creations into three-dimensional spaces.

In *Ben Jones X 8* the artist filled the cavernous galleries of Ace Gallery in Beverly Hills with pulsating flat-screen animations, digital projections, and furniture-like sculptures. These mesmerizing pieces are comprised of vividly colored morphing shapes and optical illusions. Jones combines projected video and painting, making what he calls *cinema paintings*—animations made specifically for projection onto large-scale canvases that contain many of the same bold, colorful geometric shapes and patterns as in the videos, albeit in static form. Though each could exist independently, they are made to synch with each other. These works have a synergy in which the whole is greater and more powerful than the sum of its parts. Multiple cinema paintings were presented in the context of the installation—a playroom-like environment that featured a custom-designed playable ping-pong table with animal-shaped legs, benches made from painted bricks, and numerous wall reliefs in the form of straight as well as twisted ladders.

Jones is interested in how the perpetual recombination of simple shapes creates complex patterns and used the gallery setting to bombard the viewer with an overflow of imagery. His intention is to entertain, to offer a playful, dizzying, hyperreal environment, transporting the viewer into another world. Jones's abstract world is a digital invention dependent on the tools of his trade.

Programs like Flash and After Effects allow for seamless transformations of vector-based graphics, and Jones takes advantage of all they have to offer.

Both Jones and Cortright have had prominent careers as web-based artists, in which the goal has been to expand the boundaries of the medium. Cortright has used internet video diaries, screensavers, Photoshop filters, green screens, and appropriated animations as other artists use paint, pencils, and brushes. Her early work was net-based art. In addition to various net. art projects, she has also uploaded her videos to YouTube. She pursues self-portraiture, performing in front of her computer's webcam and recording these private moments, and then applying "cheesy" digital effects she downloads or purchases online. Acting like a teenage girl in front of the camera, she dances, smiles suggestively, twirls, and plays with her hair. These purposely banal works attract a huge following. Schooled in internet methodologies, Cortright even created an algorithm based on number of views to determine the price of these artworks. She has become something of a sensation, and began exhibiting works offline, rather than online.

The artist's fascination with watching and being watched extends to her large-scale projections. For her installation *Niki, Lucy, Lola, Viola*, at Depart Foundation, Cortright appropriated animations of pole dancers from the online website VirtuaGirl, compositing them against a bright green background, and projecting them onto a huge wall at more than double life size. The giant gyrating

figures spanned the wall in the cavernous, dark, and carpeted space. Cortright matter-of-factly declared in numerous interviews[2] that she purchased the animations of the girls from the VirtuaGirl site, insisting she carefully sifted through all the available dancers to insure a diverse palette of dancing styles, ethnicities, and pixel dimensions. Her considerations about choice of dancers and their subsequent compositing were aesthetic, with little thought given to their humanness. For Cortright, the pole dancers function as elements in a toolbox—moveable objects that can be combined and re-presented like compositional elements. The dancers in *Niki, Lucy, Lola, Viola* perform in a non-space—a generic green-screen environment. In the accompanying projections, she provided some background for the figures. Horses and elephants as well as flocks of birds, tumbleweeds, and twinkling stars paraded across Cortright's appropriated kitschy land- and sky-scapes. As if on different planes, these elements pass each other by, but never interact. Like the dancing girls, they do their thing in isolation.

Cortright also makes digital paintings, slowly morphing abstractions that are made from recording the addition of, and changes to, hundreds of layers in Photoshop and After Effects. Using the tools, filters, and palettes of these programs, she creates abstracted landscapes by tracking the changes applied to generic appropriated originals, transforming them into animations that continually morph. Watching one color or shape slowly morphing into another and by association realizing the changes are an additive and subtractive process toward the completion of the final work, the viewer becomes aware of the artist's process. Cortright's digital paintings are soft and atmospheric and undeniably beautiful. However, they are about little more than the process of their making and the mastery of specific digital tools.

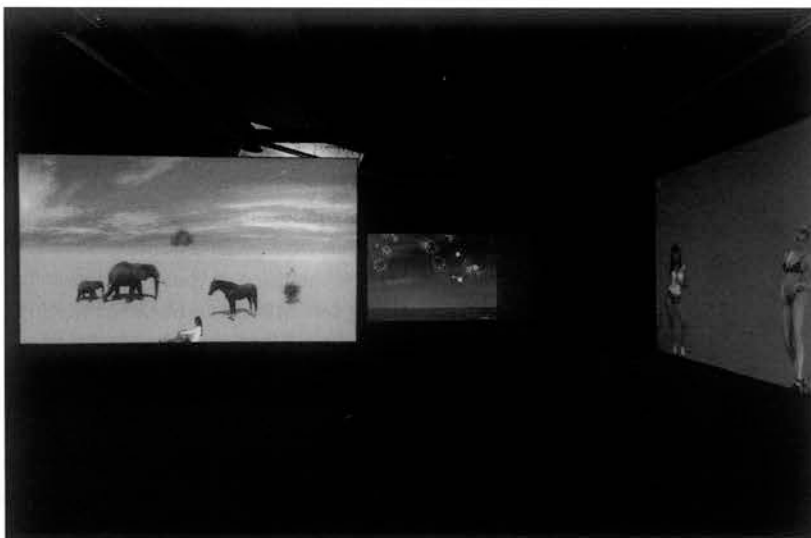One might assume Cortright's treatment of these internet tropes (as well as the way she uses her tools) is about the banality of this content, its sameness and universality, as well as its omnipresence in our lives. However, her uncritical use of it suggests no such analysis or intention. Similarly, as co-author of the seminal software language Processing used by many artists, Reas's use and transformation of net imagery is part of a continuing exploration of the nuances of what code can do. Although his pieces abstract data into generative artworks that visually recall Abstract Expressionist and Color Field paintings, they are constructed through a series of instructions and share a kinship with conceptual art. Jones uses software as a drawing tool, and although his work is not dependent on appropriated content, his creation of hybrid artworks presented in immersive installations where everything is in constant motion aligns his work with post-internet concerns.

In the *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord writes, "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."[3] Reas, Jones, and Cortright create spectacles that are collections of images—immersive environments filled with digital projections, an endless flow of ever-changing mediated imagery. They mine mass media, appropriating ideas, techniques, or imagery and transforming aspects of contemporary culture into abstractions. The power of their work lies in their ability to create evocative imagery using the artistic tools of today—code and software, monitors and projections. As interested as they are in using digital tools to create discreet objects, they are also aware of the power of art—in Debord's terms, as a social relation among people—and all three involve the viewer as an active participant in their installations: Reas relies on Twitter feeds (a contemporary way of relating socially), Cortright provides bean bag chairs and a carpeted space inviting the viewer to sit back, relax, and spend time in her multimedia environment, and Jones provides custom benches and a ping-pong table to incite audiences to interact. As true post-internet artists, they understand the value of hybrid forms, embrace technology as a tool, and indulge in saturating the viewer with a constant flow of mediated imagery, immersing them in spectacle.

Installation view of *Niki, Lucy, Lola, Viola* (2015) by Petra Cortright; courtesy the artist and Depart Foundation

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NOTES 1. Christiane Paul, interview by Marisa Olson, "Collectible After All: Christiane Paul on net art at the Whitney Museum," Rhizome.org, August 10, 2015, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/aug/10/artport-interview-christiane-paul/. 2. See, for example, Catherine Waglery, "Petra Cortright Is Merging Art and the Internet—Using Virtual Strippers," *LA Weekly*, July 8, 2015, www.laweekly.com/arts/petra-cortright-is-merging-art-and-the-internet-using-virtual-vtrippers-5775063. 3. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), 2.

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