

Hyper-Objects

Brenna Murphy meditates on digital ruins

Stepping into a type of future-present, DAMN° had a private conversation with artist Brenna Murphy in February of this year, in an attempt to dissect the elements that comprise her art works and to discover what these mean, both individually and as a whole. Inherent in Murphy's oeuvre is a reference to a post-Internet paradigm, while simultaneously the universal issues the works deal with also partially apply to a pre-Internet society. Murphy's research focuses on developing techniques for exploring and expanding the framework that shapes human consciousness and reality; thus, on eternal issues that have existed long before Internet, and will continue to exist.

FRANCESCO SPAMPINATO

Brenna Murphy's multimedia production, which consists mainly of computer-generated images and environmental installations, stems from the combination of abstract forms, or hyper-objects, as defined by the young American artist. These are organic elements, born out of a surrealist process of two-dimensional automatic writing. Murphy intuitively reproduces the curves and proportions of everyday objects with her computer mouse, "as a kind of meditation", she states. "The whole activity is a way of heightening my awareness of ubiquitous shapes, thereby expanding my perceptual framework." She then elaborates these shapes with the aid of image-editing software, like Photoshop, Blender, and After Effects. These elements, stuck to each other, consequently give rise to faceted compositions halfway between electronic circuits and spiritual Hindu symbols such as Yantra and Mandala, whose hypnotic structure consists of geometric elements in almost cosmic proportions.

Some modules seem to be carved into minerals, others into transparent or translucent sheets of polymethyl methacrylate (PMMA). Through laser cutting and 3D printing, many of these forms become sculptural objects, which are then inserted into installations. Murphy's idea is to explore the boundaries between physical reality and virtual reality, involving the viewer in a process of discovery whereby "scale is an important element of the equation", according to Murphy. Although made up of abstract fractals, these works take on familiar architectural appearances. More than maquettes for new buildings, however, they seem to be the ruins of ancient human settlements, belonging to a pre-technological but extremely advanced civilization, such as the Egyptian or Aztec (not surprisingly, both are often associated with alien mythologies). Their internal structure is regulated by principles of symmetry and repetition. The artist, in fact, makes use of recurring patterns,

both as a formal strategy and as a symbolic element. The inclusion of screens within the installation enhances the labyrinthine and alienating effect: all of a sudden, the environment that surrounds us becomes immaterial and claustrophobic. The effect is the same as what we customary feel in our daily lives, when, after hours of interaction with digital devices and touch screens, we tend to apply – without success – the same commands and procedures to our real space: zooming, clicking, scrolling, etc. Murphy's research is focused on this liminal distinction – it relies on digital technology, but digital technology also represents its message. "I'm interested in the shape of human consciousness", expounds the artist. "Technology can be a prosthetic for human consciousness, and in turn, can influence and reshape consciousness. The prosthetic use of technology is a tool for meditation and exploration. I know my work is tied to technology at a very fundamental level."

UNDOING MATERIALISM

Murphy's research is often framed in reference to a certain post-internet paradigm, along with that of artists such as Alexandra Domanovic, Oliver Laric, Katja Novitskova, Tabor Robak, and Travess Smalley, among others. Post-internet – one of the most debated terms in visual culture of late – is a phase of visual research that, after the initial utopian euphoria over the Internet, focuses on its negative consequences, of which we are just beginning to become aware. The Internet is seen from a dystopian perspective by this new generation of artists, often through the de-contextualization of 'digital' elements, which are more like archaeological ruins or folk artefacts than readymades.

At the same time, these artists deal with universal issues that also apply in part to a pre-Internet society. Murphy agrees. "My research focuses on developing

TOOL ARRAY, 2013
Sculptural installation
Kunstverein Düsseldorf
Image courtesy of the artist





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OPAL TWINS, 2013 (1)
Archival pigment print, 100 x 100 cm
Kunstverein Düsseldorf

CEREMONIAL CHAMBER (2)
Interactive light-audio feedback ecosystem,
Binary Lore at Threewalls, Chicago, June 2013

GLYPH~GARLAND RESONATOR, 2014 (3)
Sculptural installation, UPFOR gallery, Portland, Oregon

Images courtesy of the artist

techniques for exploring and expanding the framework that shapes human consciousness and reality", she says, "so yes, in this sense I'm focused on eternal issues that have existed pre-net and will continue to exist post-net." No wonder, in fact, that as past influences she cites the painter Georgia O'Keeffe, the filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, the writer William Gibson, and minimalist composers such as John Cage, David Tudor, La Monte Young, and Terry Riley. Though isn't that, perhaps, what they all have in common, a tendency to dissect reality into discreet, archetypal elements through processes of meditation? These names also say a lot about the possible future development of Murphy's research, which has recently expanded to include performance and sound. This multidisciplinary approach partially derives from her collaborative experiences in the Oregon Painting Society collective, and as half of the duo MSHR, with Birch Cooper. MSHR's work, in particular, consists of live media, which incorporates laser beams, holograms, and DIY sculptural music synthesizers. The environments in which they come into being seem to be a natural extension of Murphy's spaces: metaphysical ecosystems that temporarily transport us into a virtual dimension, showing us just how little material is left of our reality. <

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