Jon Rafman: The end of the end of the end

For emerging Canadian artist Jon Rafman, the real and virtual worlds are not two distinct realms but rather are a single—at times sordid—conceptual space. Throughout his diverse body of work, Rafman conflates digital and physical experiences, urging viewers to reconsider the sometimes porous boundaries between online and offline existence.

The end of the end of the end is a multidisciplinary installation that includes recent sculpture, photography, and moving image. Rafman's work exposes the paradoxes and eccentricities of modern culture, particularly those mediated by online interactions. Sourcing imagery from Tumblr to the depths of the Deep Web, Rafman foregrounds how the Internet operates both as a tool of connectedness and a conduit of estrangement.

Drawing largely on the vernacular of Internet subcultures, Rafman acts as both amateur observer and critical anthropologist, simultaneously participating with those communities and assuming a removed, objective stance. Rafman's work often includes images of social and sexual deviance found on the Deep Web—the majority of the content on the Internet, inaccessible through standard search engines, where a number of illegal and underground practices thrive. Through his 3-D-printed sculpture and digitally layered photography, Rafman blurs the line between representations and their tangible subjects. The artist points out that the virtual is no longer a secondary escape from reality. Rather, the two ostensibly distinct realms cohere into one entangled social space; digital, online experiences now assume concrete form. With a tone that is both detached and actively engaged, Rafman excavates the immanent tensions of contemporary life.
In Rafman’s single-channel video, Still Life (Betamale), a score by the experimental musician Oneohtrix Point Never serves as the backdrop for a provocative moving image collage. If the “alpha” of any social community is the designated leader, then Rafman’s “betamale” functions as the subordinate or secondary persona. Here, the “betamale” is suggested by the male figure muzzled by training bras and girl’s underwear. He is a prism through which the recesses of the Internet are made explicit, situating viewers as voyeurs into the world of the Deep Web: a site of rampant criminality and pornography where the global black market for hit men, bulk credit card information, and illegal drugs thrives—all inaccessible through standard search engines and invisible to the average Internet viewer.

Still Life (Betamale) presents a series of discordant GIFs and video clips, borrowing from the aesthetics of imageboards and pointing to the “ordered disorder” of the Internet. Through a hypnotic, digitized voiceover, the “endlessly winding paths” of Furry fandoms, Rafman guides viewers through the vignettes, navigating fan art and chat.

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1 A type of Internet forum (such as Tumblr, 4chan, and Reddit) operating primarily through users posting images. This style of forum comprises a substantial portion of Deep Web sites.

2 The Furry fandom is a (sometimes) online subculture dedicated to the emulation, celebration, and fetishization of fictional anthropomorphic animal characters. Members of the animal-costume-clad community typically gather on online forums to share fan art and chat.

3 The term “Internet troll” is typically used to describe any obnoxious, vulgar, or malicious online commenter, often characterized as an Internet-enabled homebody. “Troll caves” reveal the abject real-world conditions of Internet trolls.

4 A genre of pornography in the manga (Japanese comic) or anime (Japanese cartoon animation) style, popular in certain underground Internet circles. The genre branches off into several more specific subgenres, such as “hentai” (a catch-all term for deviant sexual preferences) and “eroge” (erotic games).

5 “Yiff” is the vernacular for Furry cybersex.

6 Related to the Furry fandom, kigurumi cosplayers (short for “costume players”) impersonate cartoon characters. Kigurumi enthusiasts dress in humanoid costumes and are known colloquially as “dollers.”

7 Integral to contemporary Internet culture, memes are any image, idea, or topic that spreads quickly throughout the Web. They can be images, videos, text-posts, or hashtags that are shared (often jokingly) on social media sites and other online forums.


New Age Demanded, 2014

Ezra Pound’s 1920 autobiographical poem, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, serves as a point of departure for Rafman’s New Age Demanded series of sculptures and photographs. Yeaming for classical Greco-Roman forms of beauty, Pound’s speaker states, “The age demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace. / Something for the modern stage / Not, at any rate, an Attic grace.” Rafman’s “modern age” revises the canonical bust form with a futuristic, digitally-driven aesthetic. The alien-like busts suggest a hybrid of traditional portraiture and contemporary technologies.

The series’s 3-D-printed and robotically carved busts, as well as the digitally-layered photographs, underscore shifting real and virtual representations of Rafman’s subjects. The three-dimensional sculptures and two-dimensional prints blur the techniques of photography and 3-D digital modeling. By incorporating each work’s underlying material in its title—Speed Demon Concrete, for example—Rafman grounds a visually unfamiliar form with a recognizable, physical point of origin.

The respectively gilded, glossy, and grainy surfaces convey sensuality, while the warped formal qualities suggest indeterminate sexual, social, and cultural identities.