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`CHARACTERS' TAKES VIEWERS ON AN UNSETTLING VIRTUAL TRIP

CAMBRIDGE - "Interactive" art suggests a degree of fun not available in your standard art gallery. In "Engaging Characters," the new show at Art Interactive, an experimental space that specializes in work like this, the strongest works suggest that while that first step into interactivity may be fun, it can also lead you down a disturbing path.

The show, put together by New York curator Kathryn Brew, focuses on narrative-based art: Each piece invites the viewer into a dialogue with a character or into the thick of a story. It's like a conversation with a slightly demented stranger. The talk could turn in any direction at any time.

I always go into Art Interactive, which opened last year, with high expectations of whiz-bang wizardry. Then I have to tone the expectations down: As sophisticated as some of the work is, contemporary technology hasn't yet reached the level of the Holodeck on the Starship Enterprise. Snafus and glitches often arise.

Even so, most of the works in this show succeed. The film-based pieces are dizzyingly provocative. Julia Heyward's "Miracles in Reverse," an interactive DVD-ROM, lets the viewer navigate through wildly looping and intersecting filmic stories. Drag and click the mouse, and you can change the story line, or the camera angle, or the speed at which you view the piece.

Heyward calls "Miracles in Reverse" autobiographical. It begins with the format of the game show "To Tell the Truth," and the viewer can click on one of three figures: a stereotypical '50s-era mother, an alien, or Jesus. Each plunges the viewer into a different story line, which variously explores themes such as religious zealotry and child sexual abuse. The film works like memory, obsessively looping back to painful moments, fading out here and ramping up there. This must be what it's like inside Heyward's head. It's a dark, harrowing piece, and the technology works in its favor.
"Sally, or the Bubble Burst," by Toni Dove, requires the most sophisticated interaction: You can use keystrokes, the mouse, or your own voice. Sally, the main character, is a blond bombshell dancer from the 1930s, portrayed by movement artist Helen Pickett. In one of a handful of programs, she appears in a projection and, using voice recognition software, she engages you in conversation.

There are a few problems: She didn't understand half of what I said. But I still found myself laughing with Sally as if I were chatting with a real person. You can also feed her lines by typing them in, and in another program she will dance to the sound of your singing. While the interactivity here is less than smooth and often frustrating, Dove has created a vivid character and a lush, inviting, and bittersweet world.

On a lighter note, there's Marina Zurkow's and Julian Bleecker's "Pussy Weevil," an animated goblin on a monitor who responds to a motion detector. Approach the little fellow, and he gets spooked and runs. If you stand a decent distance away, he'll reappear and start gesticulating mockingly at you. It's one-note but clever and part of a long lineage of abrasive animation that includes Wil E. Coyote and Ren and Stimpy.

Most of the interaction in "Engaging Characters" is with animated or live-action virtual figures. The only real-space work here is "Yo Yo Berimbau," two sound-activated robots by Chico MacMurtrie. Crafted from scraps of metal and plastic tubing and springs, Yo Yo looks as if he's risen from the junkyard. He leans over a makeshift, one-stringed cello, which he plays in response to rhythms the viewer pounds on the floor. Berimbau dances at the viewer's rhythmic command. Cutting loose and dancing with a robot is a great antidote to the brain strain of virtual living.

Claudia Hart and Larry Bercow offer photographs no more interactive than an Ansel Adams print, although their source is digital technology. Hart created E, a Barbie-shaped figure who changes costume according to her environment. She is a metaphor for all women, faceless in a world that celebrates fashion and physique. Bercow photographed settings, and Hart placed E in them - on a New York street, where she becomes black, or in a terminal hallway at an airport, where she looks pert and sassy in a Thierry Mugler apron dress. E looks like any computer-animated babe (think of Lara Croft before she hit the big screen). While Hart strives to make a political statement, you wouldn't know that without being told. She could just as easily be manipulating the buxom E to more commercial ends.

Every time I've gone to Art Interactive, at least one piece has been on the fritz. It's par for the course with the sometimes delicate or untried new technologies here. This time, "RL (Real Life)," an animated piece by Janine Cirincione and Michael Ferraro, wasn't working. It features a couple sitting in front of a TV, drinking and talking. The conversation is supposed to change in response to a motion sensor, so the viewer can affect what's said.

All told, "Engaging Characters" isn't always engaging, but when it is, it can suck you in like your own nightmares.

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