

# TORO

## VIRTUAL BODIES



*Machina*, 2006, Claudia Hart

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Claudia Hart stages a romantic rebellion with her series of subjective nudes. An active artist, curator and critic since 1988, her figures differ emotionally against how women are typically, sexually determined in digital design. She creates virtual paintings that expose 3-D imagery integrated into animated loops, and multi-channel animation installations.

### **Q: What drew you to work with virtual conceptions of the body?**

**A:** This was an evolving process. The body of work I made before this 3-D one consisted of illustrated books. They were hand drawn, somehow early precursors of what is now called the graphic novel. My books were ironic and perverse – fake kids books for adults. The one that became a cult classic is called “A Child’s Machiavelli.” When I first started working with 3-D animation, I wanted to continue with that genre – animations that seemed childish but were really for adults. Then I went to a show in 2001 at the Metropolitan Museum in NY, in their fashion department, called “Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed.” It really blew me away. It connected fashion to the different distorted body images that in different historical moments comprise a culture’s idea of beauty.

After seeing that show, my first response was to design a virtual “top model” who would mutate into various deformed but beautiful incarnations. My first images and animations were of this imaginary model, who I called “e.” But then I moved away from mass culture as a working paradigm. I think this is because of the changes I saw in it.

I teach 3-D animation, now at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, but formerly in various vocational schools in New York City. My students in the vocational schools wanted to go into the entertainment industry as animators. When I first started teaching, seven years ago, they seemed to mostly want to work for Pixar and make children’s entertainments, but with the Iraq war all of this gradually changed. The game industry and the military are in business together, I think this is how the term “military entertainment complex” has gradually replaced the “military industrial complex” in academic jargon.

Since the start of the Iraq war, young people have been bombarded with violent, macho, aggressive games. Eventually culture has impacted on students. My students slowly evolved into another type of

person, very macho and very misogynist and for the most part idolizing the first-person shooter games and related special-effects feature movies that saturate the media.

It was in the context of this kind of teaching environment that I began to evolve my current work. I wanted my imagery to be female and sensual and emotional, in response to the kind of cold, violent and misogynistic imagery that I was constantly being confronted with by my students and in the commercial media.

**Q: How do you see your nude bodily forms compared to how digital media commonly constructs fantasy female figures?**

**A:** The media constructs fantasy female figures inspired by the Playboy model. This means an hourglass figure with giant breasts. It's a style that emerged in the '40s and the '50s. Although Hollywood movie stars are rarely based on that model anymore and come in an unexpected variety of forms and shapes, 3-D gaming characters always are very 1950s.

If you think of characters like Lara Croft packing two pistols and two giant cantaloupe breasts, and BloodRayne, who has a similar body type but is styled like a vampire packing a machete, they hark back to the pre-feminist, socially conservative era of the '50s – but further identify woman as a dangerous evil temptress who can adeptly harness military technology to sexually bait and then absolutely annihilate a user.

The character I've been using is based on the Peter Paul Rubens type. Rubens was a baroque painter who based all of his paintings on his wife. What struck me about Ruben's women is that, while they are not typically beautiful by today's standards, they are still utterly erotic. His models were very plump and always sort of bug-eyed, but still compelling. So in an intentional move in the opposite direction of the 3-D game erotic type, I based my model on Ruben's wife.

I'm currently working on a new model that will be inspired by Kiki, the early 20th century model who inspired Man Ray and many other early modern artists. I like her because she is also rather odd looking, and has a body that is, by contemporary standards, not perfect but is, like the Rubens, very seductive and compelling.

**Q: The motion of your figures seems erotic and suspenseful, yet so different from the sorts of frantic thrusting common to hardcore porn.**

**A:** Initially I slowed everything down intentionally, to make an anti-gaming or anti-animation time space. I view 3-D animation in a larger art context. In terms of a medium, I thought and still think of it as a hybrid between painting, sculpture, photography and film. I also imagine the time-space of a figurative painting, in which a single image congeals an entire story. If a painting were to move, it would have the kind of slow motion but very condensed time scheme that I use.

**Q: What do you think of these nudes – the expressiveness of their repetitive gestures?**

**A:** I try to make each gesture very loaded. Classical Disney animation moves a character from "pose to pose," from key frame to key frame. If you think of my work in terms of being an animated painting, I move the characters from archetype to archetype. By this I mean from one classical composition to another. I move them very slowly between these archetypal compositions, so the animations have a certain familiar resonance

**Q: How do you see the environments in relation to your sensual forms?**

**A:** The photographs are a slightly different project than the animation/installations. Lately I've been working sculpturally. This means that I'm using a relatively new software that can produce very organic, irrational deformations of a 3-D model. Before a couple of years ago, models were limited to very smooth, stereometric, mathematical forms.

Now with more advanced technology, one can create deformations that are more chaotic. I started to use a rapid-prototype machine used in manufacturing to prototype industrial machine parts. I use the prototyper to make a "printout" of one of my mutated, organic-looking models. I like the contradiction between the organic, rotting, erotic feeling of the model and the industrial plastic that the rapid-prototyper prints out.

I then started placing these models in photographs of modernist, high-design buildings.

As when I make the small sculptures, with their strange tension between the organic, rotting form of the figure and the industrial plastic material, there is a similar inversion in the photographs. The high-tech,



*Ophelia*, 2008, Claudia Hart

rationalistic, hyper-modern architecture sits in an uneasy relationship with these sculptural, decaying, yet erotic bodies. And I like this uneasiness.

**Q: How do you see the lone figuration of your exposed figures? Are you interested in ways the virtual nude can appear with senses of interiority, perhaps sensual autonomy?**

**A:** Yes. I try to make them somehow human but at the same time obviously an artificial model. I am trying to bridge what they call “the uncanny divide.” This is a psychological term for the spooky feeling you get from things that seem both dead and alive at the same time.

3-D animation tends to have this uncanny quality, because it can be obviously illustrational in style but still have qualities of the real – meaning it casts shadows and has this sense of possessing a sculptural reality. I try to do this by giving the characters very human facial expressions, but at the same time, a schematic, sculptural quality.

**Q: There’s talk of how human biology and sexuality are increasingly affected by technology. In fantasy genres, the technological structures often seem to aggress and may get rapacious on the human – like extending their sexual organs monstrously. How do you see the exchanges, perhaps intimacies, of your forms and that around them? How they seem as if they’re comfortable in their exposure and sensuality?**

**A:** Again, I think this has to do with what I mentioned, the uncanny divide. This means that the border between the natural and unnatural is eroding, so that our cultural sense of reality is threatened. This is what creates a fascination with the “monstrous” feeling that you describe. Our cultural reality is shifting rapidly due to advanced technology and this makes us very nervous, but it’s also thrilling. The fact that a robot might titillate one is very threatening on that basis.



*The Swing*, 2006, Claudia Hart

**Q: While much of your work involves a Renaissance-style bodily form – voluptuous and nubile – how do you see the nude figure in a work like *Mutation*?**

**A:** In *Mutation*, I took the hair off of the character to give it a more clichéd 3-D-model look. So her human expression of surprise, as if she’s embarrassed by a sudden exposure – like in those dreams, where you find that you are at work, but you’ve forgotten to wear your clothes – and her obviously artificial status, is what creates an uncanny feeling.

**Q: What do you think of avatars – the idea of virtual sexual identities and experiences?**

**A:** I think avatar sex is the same thing as phone-sex – something that is both hot and cold at the same time. This is the essential nature of pornography – it is sexual and therefore hot, but emotionally cold. I see my work as being the opposite. I want it to be extremely emotional and sensitive, not cold.

**Q: Has it been interesting how others have seen your 3-D work? Like your students?**

**A:** Now that I’m teaching in an art school, my students tell me that they are moved by my work and that they can connect to it. In my first semester here at the School of the Art Institute, most of my students were of the vocational type, who imagine they will go to Hollywood after school and work in the game or movie industry. Those students are uncomfortable with my work at best, and often become threatened and act aggressively. The difference in response between young artists and young people who are headed towards the military entertainment complex is dramatic....

**Q: Why do you think commercial digital industries tend to produce such exaggerated, pornographic female fantasy forms?**

**A:** I think its because their target audience is adolescent boys who are not known for their sexual sophistication.

**Q: There's introspection and a sculptural cast to some of your forms, as if they were suspended. The faces of your figures seem notably calm in their nakedness and may seem eerie to some. I find a beauty to this. What do you think of your figure's faces?**

**A:** I think I was touching on this earlier when I talked about the uncanny divide. Their faces are schematic like sculpture, but at the same time I try to give them an emotional quality underneath the surface. It's very difficult to do. I am inspired by Leonardo's angels and other Renaissance figurative art, where there was an attempt to show rapture in a face that was also classically balanced and beautiful. I look at classical art a lot, and have done so since I was a child.

**Q: While depicting such female forms, have you come across any animated work that looks at male sensuality in ways different from how it gets rendered in porn?**

**A:** No. But it's been suggested that I try that as my next project.

**Q: Some people seem to be obsessed with their BlackBerrys, their iPods or their vibration tools. Aside from working with digital aesthetics, do you like any technological extensions?**

**A:** I never had a BlackBerry, so I'm a recent convert to the minicomputer, communication device. And yes, I love my iPhone.

*Louise Bak is a poet, with books including Tulpa and Gingko Kitchen. She co-hosts Sex City, Toronto's only radio show focused on relations between sexuality and culture (CIUT 89.5 FM). Her performance work has appeared in numerous spaces and in video collaborations such as Partial Selves and Crimes of the Heart.*