

Turning the Digital into the Material, with Feng Shui

by Amelia Rina



Sara Ludy, installation view, "*Alien (Wall Mount)*" (2015) in 'Subsurface Hell' at bitforms gallery (all photos by John Berens, courtesy bitforms gallery, New York)

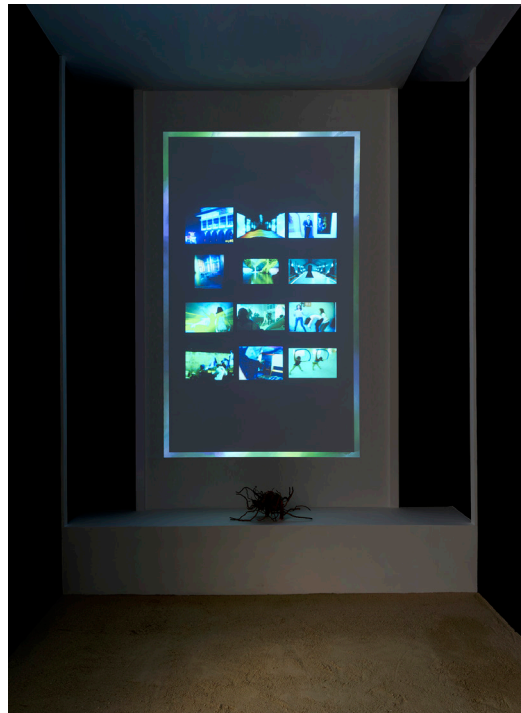
Digital data has become one of the most integral and misunderstood resources in contemporary society. In many parts of the world, people go about their daily lives completely saturated with the digital. Yet few have a firm grasp of what the nebulous technological product really is. One of the major contributions to our confusion stems from the difficulty of conceptualizing its materiality: we see the products of digital information all the time but rarely its origin or process. Where does all our data go when it's not illuminated on a screen? How does a virtual object gain significance? These uncertainties directly relate to the ways in which we, as individual subjects, interact with digital technology. In the exhibition *Subsurface Hell* at bitforms gallery, Sara Ludy materializes her digital experiences. And by using aspects of the ancient Chinese philosophical system of feng shui to inform her work, she creates artworks that exist in contradictory states of artificial and natural beauty.

Presented at the gallery's entrance, "*Alien (Wall Mount)*" (2015) embodies the paradoxical relationship between an unrecognizable figure and the relentless desire to find familiarity in everything. Digitally rendered with a marshmallowy surface and a rosy haze illuminating its underside, the object is, without a doubt, nothing I have ever seen before. And yet, by combining several items from my memory — a deep sea cephalopod tentatively named *Opisthoteuthis Adorabilis* and an amalgamation of space crafts and creatures — I'm able to make the uncanny figure come alive. The work belongs to Ludy's *Animistics* series, which includes two other pieces featured in *Subsurface Hell*: "*Cabbage Head (Energy Sponge)*" (2015) and "*Embrace*" (2015). Though the works hang as physical prints in the gallery, the forms depicted in them were originally created as objects for Ludy's project *Dream House* (2013–present), a virtual domestic space that she designed using feng shui principles, as well as inspiration from lucid dreams and sacred places. By taking the *Animistics* off of *Dream House*'s virtual walls and inserting them into the gallery, Ludy enacts a transformation from the virtual to the physical. The process creates a kind of inverse simulacrum, in which an object representation manifests from its lower-dimensional reference.



Sara Ludy, "*Cabbage Head (Energy Sponge)*" (2015), from the series 'Animistics,' dye sublimation on aluminum, 40 x 26 in / 101.6 x 66 cm

Though the Animistics were initially created as decorative pieces in Dream House, their conversion in and out of virtual space mutates their meaning. Through their transition from 4D virtual objects to 2D physical ones, the Animistics simultaneously manifest as originals and representations of themselves. Furthermore, unlike with a design or rendering, Ludy eliminates the hierarchical relationship between a schematic and what it describes. Instead, the Animistics multiply and diversify like seeds germinating: born from the same entity, each iteration develops into a series of individual yet interconnected forms.



Sara Ludy, "*Low Prim Room*" (2012–16), installation dimensions variable (click to enlarge)

Ludy continues her fluctuation between virtual and physical realms through the other pieces included the exhibition: "*Low Prim Room*" (2012–16), "*Rose*" (2015), and her Clouds series. Similar to the Animistics, which originated on the web before Ludy brought them into the physical world, "*Low Prim Room*" began in 2012 with a Tumblr account for which the artist collected found images online, then categorized them based on similarities in formal qualities or subject matter. In this iteration, sets of 12 images are projected on the back wall of a small alcove built into the gallery, inspired by a tokonoma — a recessed area in Japanese homes dedicated to art. Each set represents a collection of mundane visual data culled from the forgotten depths of the internet, reinvigorated with novel significance when placed in careful juxtaposition. Ludy's act begins as a kind of an-

thropological expedition through our collective digital history, then becomes a personal meditation that strives to find meaning and balance within chaos.

“Cloud Relief 1” and “2” (2015–16) most literally represent the amorphous nature of digital data. Amoebic smudges of lilac, sea green, black, and white flow in and out of each other on large-scale screens. Though the animations get their names from nature, these clouds have never passed through our atmosphere; instead, they reference the mysterious space where we store an increasing amount of digital information: The Cloud. Ludy continues her dance between the virtual and physical realms by extending the exhibition online through “<http://xzw9hz8hzy9yx1j23hwy2x09uzj.us/>” (2015), a webpage that hosts an animation of a sculptural face with water continuously streaming down from the top of the screen. The animations of swirling clouds and flowing water demonstrate the new states these element can take; in their digital forms, they’re made up of 0s and 1s instead of hydrogen and oxygen.



Sara Ludy, left to right: “*Cloud Relief 2*” (2015) and “*Cloud Relief 1*” (2015), installation view in ‘Subsurface Hell’ at Bitforms Gallery

Like the digital interfaces that quietly dictate so many of our daily actions, Ludy’s use of feng shui throughout the show is never overtly present; instead, a tranquil sense of logic binds together the various elements. By combining a visualization and structuring of virtual information with the search for harmony in life, body, and mind, Ludy produces both on- and off-line environments that calm the constant barrage of digital information we face. And, considering the improbability that the progression of technology will slow down any time soon, the ability to organize the digital in pleasing and accessible ways appears increasingly relevant.

Sara Ludy: Subsurface Hell continues at bitforms gallery (131 Allen Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through February 7.