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With a nod to the past, he taps into Internet's images

By Cate McQuaid

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PROVIDENCE — A tidal wave of imagery flows over the world's computer screens in any given minute. Artist Siebren Versteeg honors the past and embraces the digitized present in his solo show "In Advance of Another Thing," at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art.

The small show features just four videos. In each, Versteeg frames a flow of random images kicked up by the Internet with art-history tropes. It's a great idea, representing, as contemporary art should, an integration of old and new. Still, it's taxing to wade through the mundane morass of Internet pictures.

Database art, in which information is the artist's main medium, has been around for about 20 years, and it is becoming increasingly prevalent. Locally, it popped up last year in George Legrady and Angus Forbes's "Cell Tango," a visual concert of ever-changing photos shot with cellphones, in the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College.

This kind of work, which changes before the viewer's eyes and occasionally as a result of the viewer's actions, has an urgency and freshness that commands attention in ways markedly different than a painting can. You may be diverted by a stream of digital imagery; you may contemplate a painting. Versteeg would be a truly great artist if he were able to capture both responses in one work of art, but that may be impossible. Excitement will always trump contemplation. It's how we're wired.

In an homage to Jasper Johns, Versteeg's "Flag" is a flat-screen monitor mounted high on the wall, featuring an American flag continually "painted" with smudgy digital brushstrokes as images from the Internet pop up over its surface. Gradually, the flag paints over them, and more images arise. A program based on a dictionary of 17,000 random words selects the images from the Internet. While I was there, pictures of an old airplane, an azalea plant, a pile of fashion magazines, and an old print of sailing ships, among others, flashed over the screen, then slowly got consumed by the flag.

In his own breakthrough flag paintings of the 1950s, Johns appropriated the flag so viewers could see it anew, looking beyond the complicated scrim of nationalism that can obscure an object with such heavy symbolic content. Versteeg's work is not as wrenchingly provocative, but it is a clever portrayal of the democratization of the Internet, and an apt representation of the United States as an ever-changing, ever-integrating organism.

In Versteeg's "Triptych," images arise that have been labeled with that titular word. It's a much smaller pool of pictures than in "Flag," and an arty one. The resulting picks flash over three monitors, mounted vertically and framed with gold leaf, like a Renaissance or medieval altarpiece. Together, the monitors end up screening actual triptychs, some recognizable — a Hieronymus Bosch caught my eye — and many anonymous, contemporary, and bland. Images are shown for six seconds each, but they're not synchronous, so two shots of a rather ho-hum cresting-wave painting from one triptych end up bracketing a 19th-century Japanese print of a theatrical floor show from another — an association that stirs up associations to, and longing for, Hokusai's woodblock prints of the sea.

Inadvertent narratives and odd associations are the very stuff of database art's random matches. Versteeg says in a flier that accompanies the show, "as the nature of the images presented by the work is random, the artist assumes both all and no responsibility for their presence and content." Artists have been using chance at least as far back as the Dadaists; this work follows the same impulse.

"Boom (Fresher Acconci)" borrows its form from Vito Acconci's 1976 video "The Red Tapes," on view in the RISD Museum's exhibit "Subject to Change: Art and Design in the Twentieth Century," in a nearby gallery. In one snippet



Siebren Versteeg's "New York Windows." (Max Protech Gallery)

from "The Red Tapes," Acconci's political and social commentary chronicles the booms in American history. Versteeg snatches just that moment from the two-hour-plus work, and in black-and-white on an old-looking monitor, "Boom (Fresher Acconci)" shows a hand pulling snapshots siphoned from Google, adding the information age to Acconci's list.

Versteeg's most interactive piece is "New York Windows," on a plasma infrared touch screen. Pictures collected via a Google image search swim around bright, painterly gestures intended to evoke action painting, the New York School, and Abstract Expressionism. You can move the fixed array of images around on the screen as if on an iPhone, but you can't change them. While the gadgetry here is sexier, "New York Windows" is the weakest piece in the show. The parallel that Versteeg attempts to draw between the viewer's touch-screen gestures and action painting doesn't wash, and the digital brushstrokes on the screen get lost amid the clutter of pictures.

Versteeg makes a noble effort to place the Internet experience in the art-history dialectic. It's an awkward pairing, which may not be entirely his fault. Just as likely, we're not used to it. Yet.