

Insidious Pop: VJ Rex vs Dr Kron

Show

10 March – 9 April 2005

I just want a lovely time

I walk into the gallery and there it is right in front of me: pornography. I make out flattened shapes of green, white and black moving in orchestrated – yet unmistakable – carnal rhythm. Body shapes become clearer, morphing and pixelating – and almost Richter-like in their painterly movements. Clearly this is not your average 'come-in-your-mouth' porn movie shot with a hand held camera in a seedy motel room. Instead, with carefully posed camera angles, Paris Hilton and Rick Salomon play out their bored rich kid fantasies. Whatever were they thinking? It's disappointingly facile and dull, reeking of falseness and contrived agendas. Unconvinced by the porn, I am instead entranced by its flatness and superficiality: it's still undeniably pornographic and yet so vacuous that it's like watching a Disney movie.

But hey, it's all entertainment. And isn't that what we clamour for? There are two other flat screen monitors nearby. One is playing an excerpt downloaded from Playstation: computer generated US Navy SEALs are in action against terrorists. They sprint across deserted ship decks and through empty warehouses, firing at each other in staccato bursts of synthetic rat-ta-tats. Computer generated dead bodies hit the computer-generated deck at regular intervals: each time 'You have died, select another weapon' flashes on the screen. It begins again, new sets of data forming and re-forming into never-ending repetitive cycles of sanitised violence.

It is significant that these days the US military pay online game developers to come up with video games in order to train their personnel to kill. They have also recently launched the Stryker, an armoured vehicle that boasts only a gun on top – with the gunner tucked safely inside watching a video screen that has a zoom and uses thermal imaging. In other words, a video game. In this high-tech Baudrillardian simulation, de-humanisation of the enemy has been successful. But hey it's real – or is it?

The third monitor is playing a smorgasbord of appropriated footage, edited into an endlessly looping data stream of TV commercials, news reports from Iraqi war zones, and war movies. Largely pilfered from the US, they represent a cross section of media that the American public is daily exposed to. War is big, war gets ratings, so just keep it coming! Frighteningly, not only do we witness the collapsed delineation between Playstation games, war, advertising and entertainment, but also a further disintegration of reality. Happy Iraqis voting? Women in Iraq with rights? I smell a rat. But safely here in New Zealand, it also offers us a view back into the US culture. And ironically, don't we enjoy the view?

But this deluge is so cluttered that everything is flattened into a coded data stream of 'sameness', where even news reports about war have become popular culture. This is part of the everyday deluge of media and 'information' that forms our global view of contemporary popular culture;

all co-existing within a flattened band of games and light entertainment. Where Japanese TV commercials with their flat and stylised animation sit next to Teletubbies, plastic super-heroes, and where a little gold monkey pays pop culture homage to Jeff Koons.

On the walls is a rant: bright pink hybrid mixes of corporate logos, advertising slogans, images of tubby 'King' soldiers, Care Bears, and lined-up notches of machine gun kills. Weird combinations of the Air New Zealand logo with elephants, Muslim minarets with the Nike logo – the artists are clearly engaged with the wider notion of these fusions, perhaps more so than with exploring the minutiae of the corporate mechanism itself. Bigger than the boardroom, they deliberately plot and execute their own impossible brand mergers. And in doing so, these unlikely couplings create

interplays between child-like icons and symbols of warfare and violence; in this context their meanings are subverted and hijacked by the slick girlie-pink of the decorations and the children's plastic toys. Instant gratification. They are all seductively yelling together 'Come and play with us'. All the while, the quiet insistent beat of house music plays on. Try and listen to it, but it fades away when the synthetic machine guns go rat-ta-tat, and the ads go 'cooo'. The music, insidiously pop, slides into the walls where it merges with the pink decorations. It all comes together to form a plastic frothy language of fun and desire – but, the artists seem to be asking, what is the flipside to all this happiness?

The collaboration between Eugene Hansen (in his guise of VJ Rex) and John Malcolmson (aka Dr Kron, New Zealander, now New York resident and graphic designer), while in itself a parody of a corporate marketing team, is also a reflection of contemporary culture where 'brands of desire' are created by international conglomerates. A cynical edge exists behind the pop and gloss.

Hansen and Malcolmson know this only too well, as they masterfully play on the edge of this insidious pop culture. However, they do not offer a critique of capitalism, nor of the machine that creates the culture – rather, it is a critique of how we consume. It becomes less about being marketed to, but more about us choosing to actively participate in this globalised Western culture.

The Internet plays an important role in the circulation and dissemination of cultural capital. Increasingly, it has become the vehicle for globalisation while also enabling nations like New Zealand to easily access offshore data. The Internet was also key to the integrity of their collaboration: selections were made by Malcolmson in New York and posted on the Internet.

His choices were made among a stunned reaction to the political environment of Bush's re-election. These, in turn, were downloaded by Hansen in New Zealand, who worked with the footage to assemble and fine-tune the data streams.

Modified and recontextualised within the gallery space, Insidious Pop exists in a zone of uncertainty around the dominant Western culture, but dares to ask 'Hang on a minute, didn't we also choose to buy in to this? So come on, let's just celebrate and have a party.' But somehow there's more to it than that – it seems too much of a good time on the surface, and I'm just not sure I want the hangover.

Sandy Gibbs