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In the Studio with Jeremy Couillard

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Photos by Atisha Paulson for SIXTY Hotels

If Jeremy Couillard's work seems like a living nightmare, it's one we've certainly been beckoning to the fold since the advent of the computer. The Brooklyn-based artist dives deep into the more uncharted waters of the digital realm, with work that builds on a preexisting, underlying anxiety surrounding our tech-soaked world. Possessed newscasters, slimy talking heads, pontificating presidential figures. It's familiar territory, processed through what feels like a horror-movie lens.

Couillard does brilliant work taking some of our culture's obsessions (anthropomorphized giant animals, for example) and further perverting them, begging us to ask what the interest in said obsessions was in the first place. His art serves as a mirror—and a strange one at that. Using 3D modeling software, paint, Plexiglass, and real-time engines, the Columbia MFA grad—and current New Media professor to boot—creates oddly discomfoting, grotesquely absorbing environments that feel like possible realities in a not-so-distant future.

We headed to Couillard's studio for an in-the-flesh visit to talk glowing screens, neighborhood transformations, and the pervasive link between art and technology.



Former occupation and your most poignant memory there:

I taught high school Spanish at an Upper East Side prep school for six years. I have two strong memories: One is that we installed Call of Duty 2 on all the faculty computers and played it constantly. Second is watching a student in the back of the room count a stack of 100 dollar bills and when I told him to put them away he just looked at me and said, “You know you want it.”

Any video games that had a lasting impact on you?

Probably my first artistic and technological experiences happened simultaneously with Super Mario Bros in, like, 1987 when I was seven. I never really distinguished art from technology. They have always been linked in the back of my head.

I think that game helped me formulate a sort of early cosmology to deal with life—that everything was weirder than it seemed. That if you looked around, there were little tubes all over that could transport you to fantastical worlds.

And, at the same time, this game made me incredibly comfortable with technology and screens. It’s gross, but I love being in front of a glowing screen all day.



How long have you been in NYC? How did you end up here?

I came here in 2004 with my now wife so she could go to grad school. We’re from the suburbs of Detroit.

First apartment in NYC was _____.

Too expensive. And the landlord made us pay in cash.

How did you find your current workspace and where is it?

We are in Industry City in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. We found it on Craigslist in 2012. Around 2013, a year after moving in, Industry City was bought by a rather opaque real estate company in Atlanta—Jamestown Properties. The billionaire Rubin Schron and others also invested in it. These companies and individuals are making Sunset Park completely unlivable and unworkable for regular people. Cities are now being built for real estate speculation and not for humans. A neighborhood gets improved for future residents

that will never come rather than current ones that help fund its renovations with their rent payments. A parking spot is more valuable than a family's well being.

When we first saw the space, it was a normal industrial work place and fairly diverse. Then practically overnight it erupted in construction and dust and noise and nicely dressed white people. They installed a gym right below us. There are unaffordable cafes and cupcake shops, omnipresent Ivy League 20-somethings on MacBooks ruining the internet with their startups while drinking five-dollar lattes. Design Within Reach moved down the road from us. It is not within reach of anyone who was there before. Art studios got replaced by ad firms doing shampoo branding. There's yoga in the alley. They spam my email with ads for food trucks. You can't get a sandwich for under ten dollars. They have a "flea market" for the privileged. Our rent is not what it seemed like we agreed on: a sudden \$2,500 charge for "operating expenses;" we have to help them with their taxes and pay around four grand extra a year. They didn't explain this when we signed the lease, but it's in there somewhere in a tiny font in a language you have to go to law school to understand. The electricity is constantly going off. There is no heat on the weekends or at night.

They put on a big art show a few years ago with the Brooklyn Rail to make them seem hip and liberal and open to the arts, but at the same time they had just kicked out around 100 artists. They'll kick us out in July by quadrupling our rent. Art has turned into a weapon for real estate investors rather than against them. They did the same thing with an art show at a recently purchased South Bronx spot (coincidentally, this one was put on by the Chetrit Group, the family of that student counting 100 dollar bills in the back of my class). Industry City told us to send them our web pages and write-ups about any shows we've done. So if our art is safe and exploitable and profitable maybe they'll just triple our rent instead of quadruple it and we can stay and help make them look like they are not completely ruining one of the best cities ever. Property should not be a profit driven industry. The CEO of a company that invests in real estate should not be a billionaire or a millionaire. Buildings where people live and work should not be called a "portfolio." Landlords are holding onto things we absolutely have to have to live and do our work. And they get to decide who gets to do what work and who gets to live where. They shouldn't get to be billionaires for that while their tenants have to constantly struggle as they get pushed further and further out of the city. And these landlords especially shouldn't get to become president.

What do you eat for breakfast?

Black coffee.

A word of advice to any artists debating an MFA:

I only know my experience: My student loans are \$650 a month and I have seven-and-a-half years left of that. I had to defer for two years and every day of that cost me seven dollars. My studio is around \$550 and it will go up or shrink in size drastically in another year when I get kicked out.

Because of my MFA, I was extremely fortunate to have found a union assistant professor job in the city that pays around \$60k a year. Before that, I had a teaching job that was around \$50k a year, but without all the debt. I was also very fortunate to have met a gallery to work with through grad school and great friends and studio mates.

You grew up saddling the divide between pre- and post-Internet. I'm assuming most of your students are all children raised in a post-Internet world. How does their perception of or interaction with technology differ from your own?

It seems like a lot of younger computer users expect more seamless automation from computers. They just want the machines to do stuff for them. I'm having a very hard time getting my students to enjoy creating animations. They just want to press a button and have a pre-generated, beautifully rendered character walk around and do whatever they type in. They are always so surprised how much work goes behind something as simple as a walk cycle. It's a struggle to get them to enjoy the labor. But some of them learn to appreciate it and they like it eventually.

When I was growing up, computers didn't work quite as easily. They were much more of a pain in the ass and that's probably why I'm willing to bang my head against something until it works. I learned that

naturally, because that's how you did things in the '90s. I did email on Telnet. I have to teach persistence and attention span.

Also I think Adobe software is killing a lot of creativity. My students love it because it's so easy. But there is a very homogeneous look in most design that comes from Adobe algorithms. It's ridiculously simple to use but very hard to get a unique look out of. Adobe is made to make advertisements—the opposite of art. The Creative Cloud is an ideologically suspect package of software. I would love to not teach it or use it but unfortunately it's a reality I have to work with for the foreseeable future, as I would like my students to be able to be gainfully employed. I hope open source projects like Gimp or Blender or Unreal Engine keep growing and are able to compete. To me, those are positive and important projects that I love teaching and I think students truly benefit from.



How do you think VR will transform the way art is made and consumed?

I think before it does anything real, it has to be ripped away from Facebook and any other company that tracks a user's every move to turn them into digital commodities that are only good for showing ads to. I can't bring myself to buy any of the new VR headsets. Most of the VR stuff I see isn't art. It panders to our tastes rather than challenge them. That's all anything owned by Facebook or Google can do. That's what it's programmed to do. So maybe VR and a lot of what's going on with computers will transform the way art is made because art will have to constantly fight against and challenge these algorithms. To me that's the important work for art right now. Especially after 11/9/16. I feel like I have to make things on computers that are so ungodly fucked up that they leave you sweating or dizzy and wondering for as long as possible What the fuck was that? What the fuck is going on?

What's a day typically look like for you, from start to finish?

Train, work, train, TV and food, sleep.

Do you listen to music while you work? If so, what?

Been listening to a lot of stuff from the ZZK record label in Buenos Aires.

What are you currently working on?

I'm just finishing up a video game (<http://www.alienafterlife.com>) for an art show at Yours Mine and Ours gallery on February 17 next year.

What medium, tool, or computer application are you most interested in presently and why?

Right now, I'm mostly interested in the Unreal Engine or any game engine. I see the realtime engine as the dominant art-making tool of the 21st century in a similar way to how film was in the 20th. You can

input any type of media into it (a novel, a movie, a 3d object, an image, etc etc) and apply algorithms to it. It has become fairly simple to envision and create simulations. And simulations are the analogy of our time. We simulate everything. We program systems to give us feedback about everything from where to drive to, where to vote, what to buy, what shows to watch, what news to read. It's increasingly difficult to talk to a real human when you have a problem. We're just interacting with simulated humans. All this of course is very dangerous.

We are creating this sort of entropic closed loop that is only giving us things it thinks we want... nothing we need, nothing really new. And art is supposed to generate new ideas, not give us back regurgitated ones. This makes me want to hack away at this computational space and see if I can do new things with it. That could actually be transgressive or not. Maybe it's impossible to really fight this beast. But personally, I need to always remind myself how totally strange it is to be alive. Sometimes I feel like I'm nothing more than what the computers tell me I am: a straight, caucasian male, lives in a city, no car, married, 35-39, who likes certain types of clothes and movies and other consumer products. What a depressing and limited view of a human.

I'm also interested in Unreal Engine pedagogically. I think it's a great way to teach new media. The definition of new media to me is culture subjected to programming. And that's what a game engine does very well. Teaching programming is very difficult, but Blueprints (a sort of visual C++) is a great introduction to it. You have all the same type of variables and conditional statements, you have objects and classes. It's a great way for students to get started. It's only going to become more and more necessary and more empowering as time goes on.

What book/film/work of art most recently captured your attention and why?

I really liked Mathias Poledna's Imitation of Life at the Dreamlands show at the Whitney. It was a perfectly created 35mm 1930s Disney-style animation complete with an orchestrated soundtrack. He hired old Disney animators and orchestra musicians. It was something completely unexpected. I think I walked in the room at the right time, too, when it was dark and I didn't know what was about to happen. I'm still processing what it's about and why he made it. It barely felt like "Art," which is hard to do.

What would your own VR avatar look like?

In a way, all the weirdo characters I make on computers are my avatars.

