

THEO TRIANTAFYLIDIS

ROLE PLAY

When I first entered *Role Play*, Theo Triantafyllidis's most recent solo exhibition at Meredith Rosen Gallery (April 21 - June 9, 2018), it was a bit disorienting. I could *hear* the subject's gruff huffs and puffs before I saw them: the Ork, Triantafyllidis's VR-bound genderqueer alter ego. A gallery attendant came quickly to orient me to the protocols of *Studio Visit*, a sculptural work and virtual reality piece, in which one must interact with one of two vertically mounted televisions on wheels in order to see what is already heard. Once I maneuvered one of the TVs, which are running off a VR platform and displace the usual goggles, I was given a window onto the Ork's studio. In the room itself, there are a flat 'sculpture' composed of a mound of assorted Ork artifacts; a rock with three small yellow brush strokes, red angular fringe, and a Stargate-like ring propped up on an industrial metal support; and a tiny studio assistant dinosaur—all of which are prints on plywood. The audience must perform a kind of dance with the TV on wheels in order to see the Ork activate these objects as they traipse around the space, a one-to-one, 360 degree mapping of the gallery to the Ork's studio. Within the world of the VR, the Ork builds the sculpture, the assistant dinosaur runs wildly around the room, and the studio ephemera—sketches, supplies, and inspirational materials—is all visible.

On the *Studio Visit* monitors, the Ork gleefully tosses objects onto a massive and precarious pile. The objects that compose the sculpture seem fairly inconsequential, relics perhaps from the Ork's other life in *World of Warcraft* or the like, such as cheetah skins, spears, and an animal rib cage that doesn't ultimately make the cut into the final work. Indeed, the Ork, acting as a conduit to making the 'actual' work that appears in the exhibition, is a rather intuitive artist unlike their puppeteer, Triantafyllidis. Triantafyllidis often puts systems between himself and the final work; in previous works, this takes the form of generative code, which determines how his elements interact and play out. Here, he used a character to perform the work and ceded control to the Ork.

Using the mythos of Orks, destructive creatures not known for their smarts, Triantafyllidis-as-Ork was seemingly freed from his usual conceptual concerns. The Ork exclaims, "If I want to be a bad boy artist. I gotta make something BIGGER. Like an alien hunter robot in the Jurassic period. A vicious predator, sexy and deadly." Yet, the Ork is still haunted by art criticism and the ultimate meaning of the work. Orks are all body and little brain—clearly evident in the character creation of this particular Ork,



Theo Triantafyllidis, *Painting* (2018), installation view. All images courtesy Meredith Rosen Gallery.



their experience of painting in an aspirationally vast studio space with a gorgeous mountain view. As *World of Warcraft* meets Bob Ross, viewers are invited to see the construction of the work as Triantafyllidis-cum-Ork performs. The resultant marks are like digital stereotypes of brushstrokes, the software trying so hard to make its allusion to painting obvious.

Between the two works that compose *Role Play*, there is a constant shifting and confusion between physical and virtual, embodiment and conduit. Each work in the exhibition is displayed twice: once as a physical object and again as an object in virtual reality, on a screen. Despite the one-to-one relationship between the physical and virtual versions of the work and the space, there are marked differences. In virtual reality, the works have more vivid colors and, in the case of the sculpture, the objects appear three-dimensional. Ironically, as the painting and sculpture exit the virtual world and enter the physical one, they lose their depth. The touchable rendering of the sculpture is completely flat: a print of objects on wood supported by the visible artifice of scaffolding. In virtual reality, the brawny Ork easily manipulates what appear to be the heavy objects that compose the sculpture. The works gain mass, but lose depth in the transition from virtual to physical.

The creation of the work, documented within the show itself, also confuses these planes. To create the works in the exhibition, Triantafyllidis wears the body of the Ork in virtual reality. His physical movements generate the animation as he arranges the objects or paints, while never touching anything other than the VR controllers. The artist is liberated from the desk and able to physically gesticulate to create the work, yet the relationship between the artist's hand and the final work is no different than the relationship created by a mouse or a Wacom. Though Triantafyllidis turns the physical into the virtual and back again, there is always a translation occurring. The line between physical and virtual remains steadfast.

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whose muscles are barely covered by a black string bikini, body armor, stylish knee-high boots, and slim blue ponytail. It is this kind of overwhelming physicality that is echoed repeatedly by the show itself.

In order to make the work, Triantafyllidis hacked together a homemade motion capture system. He strapped six tracking points to his body (head, hands, pelvis, and feet) to map his movements onto the Ork. Using a 'virtual mirror' inside of Unity 3D, a popular software for game development, he trained the system to match his body and fill in the data between the tracker points. His movements are transposed into the Ork's animation, allowing him to physically create the works in a virtual environment. This is perhaps most evident in the other work in the show, *Painting*. The Ork's process of painting is embedded in the work itself; we see the completed "painting" rendered as a print on plywood and laser-cut plexiglass simultaneously as we watch the Ork narrate



Theo Triantafyllidis, *Studio Visit* (2018), installation views.