

Curator's Note + Artwork Description

CURATOR'S NOTE

THE REAL AND (UN)REAL by Julie Walsh

The Bardo: Unpacking the Real is an international exhibition featuring artists from Vienna, Rome, Los Angeles, and New York that quantifies the ephemeral as it relates to the liminal landscape of sculptural art in the digital age. The exhibit examines, 1) the real and (un)real in digital sculpture; 2) questions about what it means to view and collect digital sculptures; and 3) the role of NFTs (in this case, Bitmark NFTs) in the creation of the featured artists' work.

When I was three years old my mother began her studies with a high Tibetan lama who lectured from the Kagyu-Nyingma lineages. While most of my friends were being taught about Western ideas of heaven and hell, I was learning about being "mindful." As part of my upbringing, I also learned about a concept from The Tibetan Book of the Dead called "the Bardo." The Bardo is conceived of as a liminal state of being after death, in which you are presented at first with total darkness and empty space as your senses of hearing and sight leave you. Then you see colors, and ultimately you are exposed to images and sounds that you must identify as real or illusion. In this process of unpacking the real, you choose what is real and what is (un)real. If you have spent your life meditating, then you are able to see these images and sounds as emanating from within you, not "real." Thus, you are able to transcend illusion, the (un)real, and follow a bright light toward reincarnation. If you become afraid of what you see and hear, you assume it is "real," and you become trapped.

In life, fooled by our delusions and illusions, because we are not in touch with what is real, we may arrive in a state which is not dualistic. Buddhism also explores concepts of "relative reality" (the grind of our daily lives) versus "absolute reality," which is your real self. As my mother often said, "We are always in a Bardo." In other words, we are always in a state of becoming. These concepts inspired the title of this exhibition for Feral File. Just as we are always in a state of becoming, so could one say that the recreation of sculpture in a digital format is also in an exciting state of flux.

When I first began to conceptualize this exhibition of digital art, I had quite a different idea of the real and the (un)real. My idea was to curate a digital sculpture show in which each artwork would incorporate a unique NFT and be sold. During the last month, as a result of the absurd media hype given to NFTs and digital art, I reflected more deeply on how to create a show with the depth and substance that truly resonates with each artist's "absolute reality." The explosion of sudden interest in NFTs seemed dreamlike and unreal to me. Because of this, the show needed a conceptual reboot. Thus, I reflected on the most dreamlike, unreal, and liminal state of being I could think of-the Bardo.

In a recent conversation with my 87-year-old mother, she said that after attending one of my social VR exhibitions, "No art is real. It is all a construct." If no art is real, then traditional art and digital art become equally constructs, or (un)real. What is digital sculpture? Is it real sculpture? How do you own something that is ephemeral? What is ownership in digital art, anyway?

In the Bardo, we each have the opportunity to choose what we believe is real or (un)real. Similarly, one can choose to think about whether digital art is real or not. With questions like these, the artists and I reconceptualized the show as a digital sculpture exhibition where the concept of what and how NFTs are used would become central to the creation and thinking behind the work. "Don't just show your digital art on Feral File; figure out how the NFTs can be more like a medium to be explored." The question generated a conceptual leap that the artists were eager to explore. To put it another way, we decided to think of using NFTs in the conception of the artworks as being closer in nature to creating site-specific installations, using Feral File as the site.

Kant's idea of "the thing in itself"- that we can't comprehend reality in itself, the "monumental world," because we are too trapped in our own categories and preconceptions-informs this view. As the real becomes more (un)real, or at least immaterial, through digital (re)interpretation, our ability to comprehend, categorize and "place" it requires greater and greater ingenuity if we are ever to approach Kant's ideal. The work in this exhibition demonstrates the unparalleled power of the arts to explore the complexity of such questions in ways that are largely unavailable to other disciplines.

As we prepared for this show, the artists had many collaborative discussions about the real and (un)real, and figured out how to take the idea of a sculpture to the next level by reinventing how sculpture can be seen and collected. These digital sculptures can be viewed online in a variety of ways, and some are downloadable as desktop applications, AR apps, and VR experiences. A few of the artists took 3D scans of existing physical objects and used these as a departure point as they merged these IRL (in-real-life) objects, such as face or body scans,

with sculpted forms from their imagination.

Thinking about the real and (un)real also led the artists to ask how you can own something that is ephemeral, such as a digital file, and how a collector can use what she has purchased. As such, *The Bardo: Unpacking the Real* features many different innovations around the notion of ownership. A range of solutions were created, including buying a ticket that gives you a secret password to view a file, to “owning” the right to see what’s inside a peep box, to accessing not just the ability to see a sculpture, but the privilege of using it for new purposes, thus giving a new life to the digital file.

This is an exhilarating time to be curating a show of digital sculpture art, as the possibilities of what sculpture can be-and how one can view sculpture-is in a constant state of flux. *The Bardo: Unpacking the Real* exemplifies the creativity, enthusiasm, and energy (both human and electromagnetic) that reflects this historic time in art history.

ARTWORK DESCRIPTION

Carla Gannis’s “peep-o-rama” playfully examines what it has meant to gaze at a sculpture throughout the canon of art history. Inspired by one of Gannis’ vivid dreams, the piece was further informed by the Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678) peep box show at the National Gallery in London. To create the colors and forms in the peep box backgrounds, she trained an AI using images from Times Square pornographic peepshows (for the colors) and images from Dutch painting (for the forms). Once a collector purchases Gannis’ work, the mystery of the peep box’s contents is revealed through a variety of unique experiences, including a view modeled after one of Hoogstraten’s works, a single-person VR view (which allows you to visit the inside the peep box itself), and a social VR version where you can hang out with your friends in a space-age bachelorette pad. The peep box sculpture addresses such serious topics as gender and body politics in art history, the idea of public and private ownership of data, and how technology challenges the very notion of seeing.

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