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Video Art Thinks Big: That's Showbiz

A Medium Breaks the Bonds
Of Time and Expectation
To Find Its Inner Razzle-Dazzle

WE'RE in a house of many tight, messy rooms. In the suburbs? Cyberspace? Hard to say. Anyway, it's night. A door bangs open. A girl, who is also a boy, dashes in, talking, talking. Other people are already there, in gaudy attire, dire wigs and makeup like paint on de Koonings.

Everyone moves in a jerky, speeded-up, look-at-me way and speaks superfast to one another, to the camera, into a cellphone. Phrases whiz by about cloning, family, same-sex adoption, the art world, the end of the world, identity, blogging, the future. Suddenly indoors turns into outdoors, night into day, and we're at a picnic, in dappled sunshine, with a baby. Then this all reverses, and we're indoors again. A goth band is pounding away in the kitchen. The house is under siege. Hysteria. Everyone runs through the walls.

This is a highly impressionistic account of Ryan Trecartin's sensationally anarchic video "I-Be Area," which made its debut in the Elizabeth Dee Gallery in Manhattan last fall. The piece caused a stir, in part because most people had never seen anything quite like it before, certainly not in an art gallery.

Art video still has a funny reputation, left over from the 1960s, of being a serious medium, made for function rather than pleasure, as opposed to film. Yet "I-Be Area" was pleasure all the way. It was nonstop visual razzle-dazzle. It drew on every cheap-thrill trick in the digital graphics playbook.

More radically, it was the length of a feature film. More radically still, it told a story, one with dozens of characters and multiple subplots, which is what entertainment, not art, is supposed to do, if you assume there's a hard and fast difference between the two.

Mr. Trecartin, apparently, does not assume this. He is not alone. The American artist and performer Kalup Linzy, for example, has invented a serial soap opera around a dysfunctional African-American family. Sadie Benning uses hand-drawn animation to tell bittersweet tales of urban gay life. Nathalie Djurberg, born in Sweden and living in Berlin, sculpts clay figures and sets them in sadistic encounters. These artists, using video that is cheaper and more accessible than ever thanks to digital technology, are creating a new kind of 21st-century art that is narrative in form and potentially epic in scale.

At present it is shaped by a combination of pop fantasy, ingrained cybersmarts, neo-tribalism and an angst-free take on contemporary life that marks an attention-deficient Internet culture.

The relationship of this work to an art world structured on galleries, museums and fairs is, potentially at least, one of detachment. You can experience "I-Be Area" on a laptop wherever and whenever you want. That may be a reason why few of these new video artists feel the need to live in New

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Scenes from Ryan Trecartin's feature-length "I-Be Area" (2007), video art with razzle-dazzle effects and narrative structure.

ART

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York City. They have chosen a medium that is not only flexible and affordable but has a history of embracing experimentation.

Video 40 years ago offered restless, pennurious, disenfranchised and performance-based artists (many women worked in early video) an alternative to the blue-chip clubbiness of Pop painting and Minimalist sculpture. Video was associated with television and newsreels, not art. It was available and fairly easy to learn. Because it had no aesthetic history, it came with no fixed expectations. Using it allowed artists like Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, Nam Jun Paik to open a fresh chapter in art history.

Video, it is important to note, was not a static medium. Painting and sculpture could, in their ways, tell stories, but video could make stories move through time and keep moving indefinitely. Because it was relatively cheap, you could fool around with it, improvise and edit like crazy. Experimentation naturally led to self-indulgence. There was a lot of terrible, boring video in the '70s. But there was at least as much boring, terrible painting. Some of that painting still hogs space in our museums while videos sit on a shelf.

With time video gained credibility, meaning it found a market. Production values rose: better tape, richer color, smoother projection. Technical differences between video and more expensive and durable film media began to blur. After the '70s, in the interest of commerce, videos grew shorter, more polished and more self-contained, more like objects. But narrative, which required watching a video from start to finish, was a problem. With hundreds of galleries springing up in the '80s art boom, who had time to spend an hour in a dark room on a Saturday afternoon?

For the same reason, one would expect narrative video to be even less welcome now. Now there are more galleries than ever. And no environment could be more video-averse than art fairs, with cramped booths entirely geared to drive-by shopping. Yet here is Mr. Trecartin, asking us to sit for an hour and 48 minutes for a high-concept, intensely detailed, attention-demanding experience. And we gladly comply.

We do so, first of all, because "I-Be Area" is so giddy, so different. But it's also just plain strange, which is part of the larger appeal of today's video art. It represents a possible way out of something, out of the renewed tyranny of the precious object, out from under a boutique art market that has amassed grotesque wealth and power while making art itself seem small and utterly dispensable.

Mr. Trecartin, born in Texas in 1981, produces work of its moment in others ways too; it is the natural product of a generation that grew up on television and grew into the Internet. At the same time a segment of this generation wants to get away from cellphones, the Web and instant, non-stop information. So Mr. Trecartin and, even more decisively, some of his peers are using very basic digital tools to create a highly personal narrative art, almost a kind of folk art.

It is an art that adheres to the market-sanctioned genius model. Mr. Trecartin directs his videos, writes the script, designs the costumes and takes several leading roles. But he also describes his art as a collective project very much shaped by a circle of family and longtime friends. One of these friends, Lizzie Fitch, he lists as a collaborator; she is almost as prominent in the videos as Mr. Trecartin himself.

Finally, as is true with several other artists working in narrative video, Mr. Trecartin's work is part of a second or possibly third wave in queer identity politics. The big change lies in emphasis. For queer artists of Mr. Trecartin's generation, cross-dressing, cross-identifying and cross-thinking are part of a state of being, not statements of political position. Like the work of John Waters and Jack Smith, his art is about just saying no to life as we think we have seen it and saying yes to zany, virtual-utopian possibilities.

The New York artist Kalup Linzy, born in 1977, has also cooked up a populous and intensely imagined narrative in video, one based in part on the soap operas and sitcoms he watched as a child. In a multi-episode serial with the umbrella title "All My Churen," he takes the daytime drama format, with its turgid emoting and big secrets, to present the life of a fictional African-American family called the Braswells in the rural South.

As a group the family members touch on a prickly range of black stereotypes. They are all played, with awesome panache, by Mr. Linzy.

The video artist Kalup Linzy as all the characters in "All My Churen," inspired by the storytelling traditions of daytime drama.



IMAGES COURTESY OF KALUP LINZY AND TARTER & SPENGLER, NEW YORK

Culturally speaking this is a reference-intensive work, though the very notion of high art versus low art is long gone. Cindy Sherman, "The Jeffersons," Manet, Richard Pryor, Zora Neal Hurston and the drag diva Vaginal Davis are all at the same V.I.P. party. Queerness is assumed, not even worth a comment. Each video episode is an auteur product: Mr. Linzy writes, directs, acts, designs and overdubs the supporting characters with his own voice. But it's a product developed within a tight community of artist friends.

A big difference between his work and Mr. Trecartin's is in the degree of digital engagement. Mr. Trecartin goes wild with editing bells and whistles; Mr. Linzy does not. The plainness and occasional clunkiness of his video technique is one reason the Braswell serial ends up touching in a way that Mr. Trecartin's buzzed-up narratives rarely are. For all their raunchy hilarity Mr. Linzy's characters are more than cartoons; "All My Churen" is a family-values story that has a lot to do with life.

The same is true of some outstanding recent narrative video that substitutes animated characters for live actors. In these works cultural references to a childhood

At midpoint in the video the animated walkers converge on a small bar, and the mood lightens up. It's a gay bar filled with lovers and friends. A communal retreat, it's a mini-Eden, or could be in a different world. The video's final scene is in an airport, a place of goodbyes. Figures sit in isolation. The police patrol. We're back to the mood we started with.

Then there's one last image, of a couple — they might be women or men — making love on the wings of an ascending plane as silver birds float like angels through a night sky.

If Ms. Benning pulls some of the utopianism latent in Mr. Trecartin's art to the surface, another young storyteller, the Swedish artist Nathalie Djurberg, almost gleefully buries it in video animations that depict a dog-eat-dog world. Ms. Djurberg,

A new kind of 21st-century art that is narrative in form and potentially epic in scale.

born in 1978, has gone back in time to find her chosen medium, old-fashioned stop-action animation using hand-molded plasticene figures.

With this labor-intensive technology, she has created a series of picaresque short narratives that have a fanciful, fairy-tale look but devolve into scenes of cruelty and degradation: a child sexually abuses a cat; a woman whips a slavish young girl; a man slices himself to bits. Flesh rips, blood flows and characters weep big clay tears, not because they're sorry for the vile deeds they've done but because they've had to stop.

Another video by Ms. Djurberg, made on commission for Performa 07 and introduced to New York last fall, was her most ambitious yet, in every way a tour de force. Nearly an hour long, it depicts a fight to the death between a racially mixed gang of children and a pack of ravenous dogs over a meal of garbage. The scene goes on and on; dogs and kids are killed left and right, only to be resurrected in a hospital emergency room where they are tortured by doctors and nurses. Ms. Djurberg, along with two musicians — the composer Hans Berg and her brother, Pascal Strauss — accompanies it with a live score, using toys,

kitchen utensils, squeezed balloons and crushed cornflakes.

This deservedly well-received piece brings to mind certain older videos by Bruce Nauman and Paul McCarthy and bears a close relationship, psychic if not stylistic, to Kara Walker's slave-narrative puppet animations. There are also plenty of comparisons to be made to work of Ms. Djurberg's peers. I'm thinking of the ghoulish puppet animations by Bert Green and the chilling stop-action re-enactment of a robbery and murder, using animated G.I. Joe dolls, by Hank Willis Thomas and Kambui Olijimi. Then there's Mr. Olijimi's video of the life and death of a young prostitute, told within the time it takes for Nina Simone to sing "House of the Rising Sun," and the hallucinatory five-minute version of Roman Polanski's "Repulsion" by the talented Keren Cytter.

The Beijing artist Cao Fei gave us one of the best single videos to come out of China in the past few years in her "COSPlayer," about a day in the life of a feral population of adolescents who dress as Japanese anime heroes and live on the fringe of a mushrooming city. And there's the wonderful, Kafkaesque "Lost City" by Gigi Scaria, an artist from New Delhi, which I recently saw at the Newark Museum.

It's about a young man whose memory deserts him day by day. We first watch him labeling photographs of family members and acquaintances so he can remember them. Next he makes elaborate maps of his daily route to work. Finally he posts directional signs on trees and walls along the route. At the end of the video we see him stranded in the street. Someone has taken the signs down, and he can't find his way home.

Mr. Scaria, who was born in 1973, works in a traditional, linear, scene-by-scene style. Other video storytellers, like Ms. Cytter, stretch or truncate time and place. Still others, like Mr. Trecartin, are at some outer, experimental edge of video, narrative and time alike, pushing all three further out with every new piece.

In a time of speeded-up production and marketing, they are making art that runs by a different clock. They are also making art that does things that objects can't do. And they are, potentially and some cases actually, reaching audiences by a new route. When you have YouTube at your disposal, who needs Chelsea?

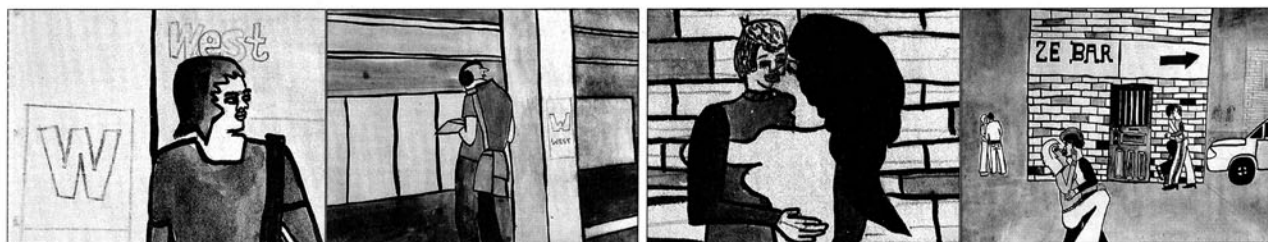
ONLINE: VIDEO

Excerpts from works mentioned in
Holland Cotter's article:

nytimes.com/design

universe of cartoons and puppets, originally intended to amuse and instruct, now are used to explore adult trauma.

Sadie Benning, born in Wisconsin in 1973, started making short narrative videos with a PixelVision camera as a teenager. She has since refined a distinctive style of hand-drawn cartooning, engagingly applied in her 30-minute video "Play Pause" (2006) to an updated Pilgrim's Progress. The video tracks several solitary figures, men and women, through an unnamed city. They walk the streets to a grim pop beat — Ms. Benning was a founding member of the feminist New Wave band Le Tigre — and troubling sights catch their eyes: newspaper headlines, corporate advertising, security cameras.



IMAGES COURTESY OF SADIE BENNING

Scenes from "Play Pause" (2006), from the video artist Sadie Benning. The 30-minute animated work depicts a kind of Pilgrim's Progress, with security cameras and an Edenic gay bar.