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Disorientation video sets stage for truthiness show at Site Santa Fe

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By Jori Finkel
June 20, 2012 12:30 p.m.

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Plenty of museums these days have orientation videos. For the mind-bending, truth-testing exhibition "More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness," which opens next month at Site Santa Fe in New Mexico, Bay Area artist Jonn Herschend has, instead, created a "disorientation" video to greet visitors entering the space.

The video starts innocuously enough by announcing some key themes of the exhibition (such as "the status of fact" and "deception and play") in text boxes. A corporate-looking, dark-suited narrator begins to intone about "subjectivity" and the "multiple possibilities found within a single instance." Then comes curator Elizabeth Armstrong of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, which organized the show in partnership with Site Santa Fe, speaking of "the pleasures ... and the perils of deception."

But in the course of the eight-minute video (watch the trailer, above), the narrative takes a wild detour into the hard-to-verify territory of personal romance gone awry. The narrator is shown to be a central player in the love triangle, and someone's car windows get smashed.

"I think Jonn's video is a great setup for what you will experience in the show," Armstrong said. "Seeing is not believing. Nothing in this show -- and perhaps in our daily lives -- is exactly what it seems to be."

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The show will run at Site Santa Fe from July 8 to Jan. 6, 2013, and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in Minnesota from March 3 to June 9, 2013.

Armstrong said the show was inspired by such diverse phenomena as the "fictions" of the Bush administration and the "para-realities" created by the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Culver City. The guiding spirit was Stephen Colbert, who introduced the term "truthiness" on the first episode of "The Colbert Report" to refer to the quality of things seeming or feeling truthful, with no actual regard for fact.

The artists in the show -- there are more than two dozen -- mine some of the same territory as his pseudo-news program: unreliable narrators and too-good-to-be-true facts, political fictions masquerading as hard truths and image manipulation made easier in the age of Photoshop. The exhibition catalog makes the argument that advancing technology and encroaching globalization have set the stage for such fabrications, but the artworks themselves are more exploratory and slippery than didactic.

One gallery will feature a set of handmade Neolithic Chinese urns that artist Ai Weiwei has transformed (or destroyed, some say) by painting the vessels with off-the-shelf Japanese house paint. Another has Sharon Lockhart's uncanny photographs of museum workers posing with Duane Hanson's sculptures of workers -- sculptures so realistic they are almost indistinguishable from the real men.

Then there's Inigo Manglano-Ovalle's contribution of a massive aluminum truck, modeled after then-Secretary of State Colin Powell's vivid but unsubstantiated description of trucks containing mobile chemical-weapon labs in Iraq.

As for Herschend's disorientation video, it will run on a flat-screen TV across from the museum's front desk, not framed like an artwork at all. It is called "Promotional Video for More Real? or (How Things Will Be Better With Lisa and Me)."

Known for subverting corporate logic and group-speak in other artwork, such as unruly PowerPoint presentations, Herschend dates his interest in exposing the artifice of entertainment back to his childhood. He spent summers working at a family-owned amusement park in Branson, Mo., called Silver Dollar City, operating somewhere in the disjunction between fantasy and reality. ("I was a train robber one summer," he offered.)

In this video, he said, part of the fun was peeling back the layers of romantic relationships. "Is flirtation real or not real? And our relationships with our spouses and our lovers: To what extent do we really know them?"

Site Santa Fe director Irene Hofmann said that she just showed a rough cut of Herschend's video to some members of her staff and board. "We did it completely straight," she said. "And it was really interesting to see their reactions -- to watch them go from taking notes to getting uncomfortable, with lots of giggling."


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