

Art Review: Derek Larson's 'Trance' makes vivid commentary on consumerism, mass media

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The term “video art” has as much relationship to what Derek Larson does with an animation loop and projection as Madonna has to The Madonna. We are talking about a whole other level of ingenuity, invention and sophisticated technique. Larson’s display of eight works, “Trance,” is indeed entrancing and will be on view at Crosstown Arts through Dec. 20. The exhibition was selected by Miranda Lash, curator of contemporary art at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky.

Larson, who lives in Statesboro, Georgia, creates hypnotically active and agitated environments that typically utilize digital video and animation projected onto frameworks fashioned from, among other elements, aluminum composite, wood, epoxy, welding tape, fluorescent light, black light and hydrocal. The highly energized images projected on these — well, you can’t call them backdrops because they have almost sculptural depth and dimension — all right, these armatures seem to flow, drip, cascade, fluctuate and possess altogether transformative powers. A photograph, catching a mere instant of a work’s constantly evolving state, reduces its effectiveness to a microscopic slide, a film still.

Since Larson’s work depends so much on light and projection, the exhibition, with the exception of one piece in the Crosstown Arts window, is arranged in darkness behind a heavy black floor-to-ceiling curtain. Because of the ever-changing and flowing shapes and fountains of myriad bright colors, the atmosphere is startling and carnivalesque, as if viewers found themselves in a rather tawdry and hallucinogenic circus. In at least six of the pieces in “Trance,” especially in the free-standing examples, Larson touches on such contemporary issues as consumerism and the omnipresence of our media-drenched connectivity.

In works like “Sent from my iPhone” and “Fountain of Youths,” these themes are made explicit, as groups of young people seem not only mesmerized by but gleeful in their attachment to their electronic devices. This aura is abetted by the waves of color that wash over the aluminum shapes as well as the hybridized patterns that gyrate in the background and the symbols for various currencies or money from many countries. Disposable income + immersion in universal media = power. Or does it equate to a form of mass conformity and hysteria?

The emphasis on the cell phone as a paradoxical vehicle for social and personal isolation and passivity as well as instant communication is acute and poignant. We see this motif in crisp outline in “Waste is What We Have,” a vividly rendered piece in which three young people project very different reactions to using their cell phones. A girl smiles as she talks to a friend or family member, obviously happy and relaxed. In the middle, a young man seriously types out a text. And on the other side, another young man gazes down at his phone with a look of intense melancholy or bemusement.

In a sense, the exhibition’s seminal work, hanging on a wall, is “Shop ‘Til You Droop,” whose punning title summarizes a sense of rampant commercialization and materialism — appropriate for so-called “Black Friday.” It is also the exhibition’s most complicated piece in terms of its layers of video imagery, its strange foundation in a series of curving aluminum loops, seemingly the prisoners of gravity, and its successive and hyperactive tides of color.

“Trance” is not only the title of the exhibition but also an apt word to describe the effect that video games, telephones, television and various forms of computers and tablets have upon millions, if not billions of people. We are now, collectively, beneficiaries and victims of electronic, economic and social forces that seem to be surging mindlessly — or sinisterly — beyond our control.

Derek Larson, “Trance”

Through Dec. 20 at Crosstown Arts, 422 N. Cleveland. Visit crosstownarts.org (<http://crosstownarts.org>).