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Ryan Trecartin: "Any Ever" YouTube art star is maddening and captivating in equal measure

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BY DAVID BALZER March 31, 2010 21:03

EDITORIAL RATING:
To May 24, Tue-Sun noon-6pm;
Wed noon-8pm, \$3-\$6 (Wed
5-8pm, free). The Power Plant,
231 Queens Quay W.
416-973-4949.
www.thepowerplant.org.

Toronto has been absolutely enthralled by American artist Ryan Trecartin's new show at The Power Plant. Regardless of the quality, durability or amicability of the work (a little more on that below) this is an unassailably great thing. It's been too long since The Power Plant has programmed something this aggressively and contentiously contemporary; it's been too long since a current show has been the topic of impassioned conversations at parties and bars city-wide; it's been too long since a local venue has aired work by a prominent young artist that loudly demands a response and engagement from outside the art world. Love it or hate it, it's a must-see. And those of us directly engaged with the arts in Toronto may look back on it as a significant game-changer.

So, who is Ryan Trecartin? In many respects he's the first YouTube art star, and his work – not unlike *Avatar* – speaks directly, in form and content, to this new context.

Though young, Trecartin has already built up a significant and quasi-legendary body of work, notably 2007's I-BE AREA, an over-two-hour-long "movie" (to use Trecartin's own terminology) that has been pieced up in fragments on his YouTube channel. One need not see the whole thing to get a decent idea of what it's all about: a terrifying, often hilarious plunge into the K-hole of digital self-fashioning.

Bursting with Trecartin's queer sensibility (but by no means enslaved or exclusively defined by it), the work has the artiest and his friends – almost always knotted out in toddler-style drag – trading insults and self-aggrandizements in a barely scrutable language primarily inspired by the post-'90s, I'm-not-here-to-make-friends pseudo-ebonics of reality television and instant messaging (which is now, in its ironic form, the main mode of superficial hipster communication). Characters desperately seek out identities and then trash them (along with every physical thing in their reach); ridicule abounds, punctuated by spastic, high-pitched and paradoxically narcissistic bonding rituals.

There is no room here to go into the specifics of the new work, which follows in kind but is cleaner, faster and more bewildering. Jon Davies and Helena Reckitt of The Power Plant have set it up brilliantly, making the gallery a materialization of the virtual space within which you'd normally consume Trecartin: the movies (some connected, some not) are in a maze of "cells," in which one finds seating (IKEA beds, bleachers, etc.) and headphones. It's all dizzyingly of-the-moment, perhaps deceptively so, and it's useful to keep asking yourself if the work holds up beyond its mesmeric topicality. (Don't worry: if you don't like this, it doesn't necessarily mean you're old and out-of-it.)

I have a problem with the length – my own sustained engagement with Trecartin has not yielded any significant insights (you'll have to spend a whole afternoon at The Power Plant if you want to consume all the videos in their entirety, and you may need a therapist afterwards) – and, at times, with the intention. Many might still prefer, say, *America's Next Top Model*, a more coherently entertaining work on the same themes that also relentlessly deconstructs itself.

Importantly, however, Trecartin doesn't want to transcend or even critique such things: he is the monster to their Frankenstein, brazenly nestling into the cultural cacophony they've created. However annoying, it's a sensibility that, at the very least, is worth familiarizing yourself with: we'll almost certainly be seeing a lot more of it.

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