



Alex McLeod's Frozen Boat balances the haphazard with digital precision.

Art Reviews

Distant Secrets

Virtual worlds ignite the imagination
|By David Jager

➔ **ALEX MCLEOD** at Angell Gallery (12 Ossington), to September 24.
416-530-0444. [See listing.](#)

Rating: NNNN

Alex McLeod's meticulously detailed landscapes are exercises in virtual fantasy, opening windows onto model worlds that are both implausible and strangely concrete. Borrowing from the visual language of architecture, gaming, anime and hand-built railroad and toy dioramas, McLeod populates his imaginary terrains with all manner of fascinating structures and textures.

These are no simple two-dimensional images, however. Each print is actually an immersive three-dimensional world that McLeod builds from scratch using professional architectural software. Models, in other words, but built entirely in virtual space. The final print is a single high-resolution screenshot taken from one of a vast number of possible viewpoints.

Though he has the means to create worlds that are eerily seamless, McLeod opts instead for structures that appear jerry-rigged and almost haphazard. Using the textures of common model-building materials, he tricks the eye into imagining the presence of a builder.

This use of seemingly hand-built structures has the paradoxical effect of making his virtual structures look far more "real" than the architectural structures we customarily see in advertising and gaming.

With their lakes of blue cellophane, glossy clouds seemingly suspended from fishing line and tiny villages that appear to be made of toothpicks on hillsides textured with straw, each landscape implies just the right amount of hand-built fragility to be plausible.

This explains the wonder and giddiness evoked by many of the images. They hit the viewer at the level of early fantasy, bringing us into the escapist worlds that are such an integral part of a child's imagination. It's hard to look at them without wanting to jump in. No wonder, then, that the back room of the exhibit is a full 3-D "walk" through a McLeod landscape, using gaming controls mounted on a pedestal. Viewers can explore and jump around a seemingly endless terrain constructed in the same painstaking detail as the prints. A game stripped of its gaming narrative, this piece restores to the virtual the simple wonder of exploration.

McLeod's work hints at the tantalizing possibility of virtual worlds beginning to take on the quirks and fallibility of the "real" world around us.

art@nowtoronto.com

