

_TUE SEP 20, 2011_ARTS



Pixar meets Picasso

Inspired by videogames like *Myst* and *Diablo*, Alex McLeod stopped using paint brushes and embraced the world of digital rendering. An exhibit at Angell Gallery is showcasing his compelling virtual landscapes.

BY: SARA J. ANGEL

Alex McLeod creates lush landscapes using cameras, lights and photographic paper. But, as he explains, “it would be a fraud” to call his work photographs. Not only are his pictures of imaginary places, they’re entirely computer generated. Still, there’s nothing fake about the success of the Scarborough native, whose work is now on view at Angell Gallery. Just 27 years old, McLeod has become one of Canada’s most noted young artists. Major collectors like the Bank of Montreal and the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art have snapped up his pictures, while international publications including *Computer Arts* (U.K.) and *Fast Company* have covered his groundbreaking practice.

Much of the hype has to do with the way McLeod’s art bridges the worlds of Pixar and Picasso. His fantastical, expansive and luminous tree-lined vistas, piled high with industrial refuse, bring to mind the imaginary details found in works by 20th-century masters like French primitive painter Henri Rousseau and Spanish surrealist Salvador Dalí. Yet McLeod never picks up a brush; his technique belongs to the future.

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“Fine-art schools teach painting, photography or conceptual art,” he says. “And if you want to learn about digital rendering you go to Sheridan. There’s no place to learn both at the same time. Maybe in the next five to 10 years things will change.” Long before starting his career, McLeod was immersed in digital culture. He went to SATEC (Scarborough Academy of Technological, Environmental and Computer Education) for high school. When asked about his most important art influence, McLeod simply responds “video-games,” then cites Warcraft 2, Diablo and Myst as the games that inspired him to build his own worlds.

While studying at OCAD (he graduated in 2007), McLeod remained firmly rooted in the virtual world. Even when he was given assignments to paint pictures, he used his computer to make preparatory sketches. “That’s what I knew best,” he remembers.

McLeod’s art developed new layers of complexity after he discovered Google’s 3D Warehouse, which offers free “models and meshes”—three-dimensional objects that he could use as he liked. He stopped using brushes altogether when his computer-generated sketches became more interesting to him than anything he might produce with paint.

McLeod broke into the local art world in 2008 after he started posting his art on Facebook. When a friend working at Toronto’s Lonsdale Gallery saw one of his works, she decided to put him in a group show. A year later, McLeod started to receive commissions to create art for advertising and print media.

The artist now works out of his home at Queen and Broadview, where he devotes half his time to commercial work. (His clients include Prius and Wired.) He creates scenes in Cinema 4D, a modelling and animation application used by architects and advertising art departments. For building landmasses, hills and mountains, McLeod favours SculptMaster, a program he keeps on his iPhone to make art “while riding the streetcar.”

His work is process-based, meaning McLeod doesn’t set out to make a picture with a fixed image in his head. Thematically, he says his message is one of “death and rebirth and how, in some sort of hippie, Lion King kind of way, if we die, the plants that grow on top of us are part of us.”

Despite his success, McLeod acknowledges that there are people who might not respect his work as much as they would if it were painted: “Digital has such a stigma because you can do just about anything with it.” It’s also part of the reason why, although he has the technology to make every aspect of his art appear

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blemish-free, he fills it with surprises such as clouds held up by strings and other elements that shouldn't be there.

“Usually with digital work you assume that it will be perfect,” he notes, smiling. “I don't think it would work if it was all too perfect.”

Fast Facts

- What's important to you in making art? “I never want to make work that you need an MFA or a PhD to understand.”
 - Where to buy Angell Gallery
 - Worth McLeod's work sells for \$4,000 to \$8,000.
 - Career advice Whenever McLeod completes a new body of work, he sends it out to 100 blogs, “to seed it.” It's landed him stories on DesignBoom and Frame, and in the pages of major publications.
 - Point of pride “The unexpected collector. When I meet somebody and I don't expect them to be into my work and then I find out that they own a piece.”
- Alex McLeod's “Distant Secrets” runs until Sept. 24 at Angell Gallery (12 Ossington Ave, #OSS.).*