

the future is already here

alex mcLeod and brendan tang



Curated by Rachel Rosenfield Lafo

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The future is already here: Alex McLeod and Brendan Tang

These days our ability to learn about art has become ever more sophisticated as we utilize the myriad technological devices that museums and galleries provide for our edification. Audio guides, smartphone mobile apps, touch screens, and other programs offer an annotated experience for the visitor. With these new opportunities for augmented encounters, our knowledge goes way beyond looking at a cultural object and reading its wall label. We may also hear a curator, artist, or critic talk about the objects, see virtual projected images that further enlighten us, and in the case of a musical instrument, hear how it sounds when played.

Sometime very soon we will be able to don a pair of eyeglasses that augment reality¹ by continuously feeding us information as we go about our daily activities, allowing us to view projected maps, see recommendations for nearby restaurants, connect to the internet, receive incoming texts, e-mails, and phone calls, and much more.² And while we are not yet in a world where “all conversation and human accomplishment happen in public spaces where people interact through social media,”³ we are close.

Artists have been in the forefront of experimenting with augmented reality applications for both didactic and aesthetic purposes. Ron Tran’s augmented walking tour, *A Way to Go*, commissioned by Vancouver’s Contemporary Art Gallery, permitted participants with GPS enabled mobile devices to access digital images, audio tracks, and videos that provided additional information about sites along the walk.⁴ For the exhibition *Augmented Reality: Peeling Layers of Space Out of Thin Air*, a

¹Augmented reality is the technology of combining real world images and video with computer-generated input such as sound, video, or graphics or GPS data.

² Thanks to Brendan Tang for telling me about Google Glass, an augmented reality eyewear system under development by Google’s research lab, Google X.

³ Francis Bula, “Building a Virtual Vancouver,” *Vancouver Magazine*, July 19, 2012, www.vanmag.com/News_and_Features/Building_the_Virtual_City?page=0%2C0

⁴ For a description of Ron Tran’s project for the Contemporary Art Gallery, see <http://www.contemporaryartgallery.ca/forum/topic/294>

sculpture park in Ghent, New York commissioned architects to create sculptural forms that appeared on visitors' smartphones as they proceeded through the landscape.⁵ More subversive was Sander Veenhof and Mark Skwarek's temporary guerilla exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art⁶, where visitors to the museum (without the museum's participation or permission) were able to see a parallel virtual exhibition in the galleries by using an alternative reality application on their smartphones.

Lovechild, Alex McLeod and Brendan Lee Satish Tang's first collaborative installation, is another contribution to this rapidly expanding field. The installation consists of several components. A ceramic vessel by Tang is displayed on a pedestal in the TechLab. A live shot of the vessel (and also the image of a person in the gallery) feeds into a computer which overlays it with Alex McLeod's computer-generated animation, and then projects the combined images on the gallery wall. This melding of the real and the virtual offers a new way for viewers to interface with an object in a gallery setting, without the need for a smartphone or other device. To further expand this meditation on material culture, Tang deliberately mimics museum displays of broken pottery fragments by making his *Lovechild* vessel an incomplete object. Yet instead of "completing" the vessel with a didactic augmentation, McLeod's imaginative overlay offers a new narrative that transforms the static object into a living, breathing organism.

This high tech collaboration between an artist who takes a very visceral approach to material by hand-building with clay, and one who creates his work entirely in cyberspace using multiple programs and computers, might at first seem odd. Yet a natural

⁵ This exhibition was commissioned by Art OMI, see http://www.artomi.org/events/2011_07_09layersofspace.pdf

⁶ Veenhof and Skwarek invited artists to submit virtual works of art that were then visible in the Museum's galleries to visitors using the smartphone application "Layar Augmented Reality Browser," <http://www.sndrv.nl/moma/?page=invitation>

affinity developed between the two when they were introduced to each other's work in the 2010 exhibition *You Are Here* at the Plus + Gallery in Denver. Although they did not meet in person until later that year, the sensibilities of Tang, a self-described gadget freak who reads tech blogs and has experimented with 3-D printing and computer generated images, were a perfect match with McLeod's visionary, fantastical cyberworld inspired by science fiction, video games, and popular culture references. Because they live in different parts of Canada—Tang in British Columbia and McLeod in Ontario—their collaboration took place via a continuous long distance back and forth exchange of ideas and images.

In addition to *Lovechild*, this exhibition features a selection of each artist's independent work. Brendan Tang's *Lovechild* vessel is part of his *Manga Ormolu* series. Launched in 2003, this series of ceramic vessels with punchy colours and hybrid shapes fuses Asian and Western cultural idioms and references. Appropriating the blue and white colours and landscape and floral patterns of Chinese Ming dynasty ceramics, Tang adds what he calls "techno-pop" robotic elements inspired by a multitude of popular culture influences, including Japanese Anime (animation) and Manga (comic books and graphic novels), toys, science fiction, and video games. The cultural mashup of Tang's vessels echoes his own mixed ethnicity (born in Dublin, he is the son of Trinidadian parents of Chinese and East Indian descent who moved to Ireland before immigrating to Canada in 1982), and his realization that "Cultural appropriation and assimilation seem like a natural part of my identity, a survival technique not uncommon among ethnic minorities."⁷

⁷ Brendan Tang's website statement about the *Manga Ormolu* series: <http://brendantang.com>

Further enriching the cross-influence of Asian and European styles, Tang adds the term Ormolu to his title, referencing the 18th century French tradition of fabricating gilt bronze decorative mounts to display porcelain, clocks, and furniture. Just as the Europeans mounted Chinese porcelains with ormolu to make them more attractive and relevant to their audience, Tang updates his vessels to make them relevant to a 21st century audience. However his “ormolu” mounts are not gilt bronze, they are robotic appendages and mechanistic contraptions like girdles, vices, tubes, giant shoes, and cables that decorate, wrap, restrain, pinch, wrinkle, and squeeze the vessels. He emphasizes the figurative aspect of the vessels by corseting and adorning them, lifting their blue and white skirts so they can birth a cluster of tubular legs (*Manga Ormolu 5.0-C*). One of the newest works, *Manga Ormolu 4-N*, has cables protruding from multiple openings, as if it is wired for action or a transfusion of materials is taking place from one part of the object-machine to another. What appears to be black foam oozes out of the pitcher-shaped *Manga Ormolu 4.1-a1*, as if some foreign substance is escaping from its body. Tang works within the ceramic *trompe l'oeil* tradition, creating the illusion that he is using materials other than ceramic (the black foam, for example, is actually textured clay).

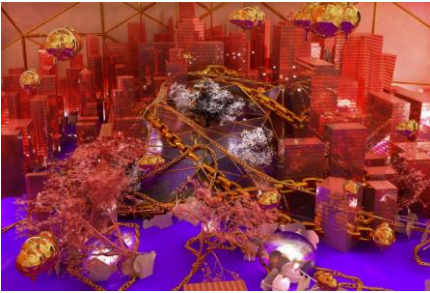


Brendan Tang, *Manga Ormolu Version 4.1-a*, 2009, ceramic and mixed media, 43.2 x 22.9 x 34.3 cm., collection of the Surrey Art Gallery

Ironically, while Brendan Tang’s ceramic vessels refer to very specific cultural styles and time periods, Alex McLeod’s computer-generated simulated environments exist outside of time and space. Composed entirely in the virtual space of the computer, and output as photographic prints, animations, or interactive

videos, McLeod's landscapes are hyper-real, vibrantly coloured, and packed full of artificial toy-like clouds, trees, vegetation, architectural forms, and bright and shiny objects.

Yet these mesmerizing, immersive fantasy worlds with fallen trees, empty buildings, and rising waters are devoid of human or animal life, without clues as to their temporal, spatial, or geographic location. There is nothing to explain how or why the extraordinary built structures were created, or whether we are looking at the decay or rebirth of civilization. Might these be scenes of other planets, future worlds where the human race is extinct, or a past time before mankind existed? Are they dystopian universes that have fallen victim to ecological disaster, or do they offer hope for the renewal of civilization? The blocky



Alex McLeod, *Untitled-Gold Chains*, 2012, chromogenic print on photographic paper, 101.6 x 152.4 cm., courtesy of the artist and Angell Gallery

impenetrable buildings in one of McLeod's newest images, *Untitled-Gold Chains*, evoke the forbidding, uninhabited cities described in the science fiction classic, *Rendezvous with Rama* and its subsequent video game RAMA,⁸ which McLeod has acknowledged as an inspiration on his work.⁹

This exhibition includes six photographs and one animation McLeod produced over the last two years. Recent works like *Cloudbirth*, a mountainous, snowy white landscape whose hanging clouds, as fragile as egg shells, crack open to birth smaller cloud particles or droplets of snow, reflect a shift in his work

⁸The book *Rendezvous with Rama* is a 1972 science fiction classic written by Arthur C. Clarke. In 1984 a graphic adventure computer game based on the book was made by Telatium, and in 1996 Sierra Entertainment created RAMA as a point and click adventure game.

⁹ "Artist Profile: Alex McLeod," *NOW magazine*, Toronto, June 26, 2009, www.nowtoronto.com/daily/story.cfm?content=170153

towards optical illusion, abstraction, and a more unified colour palette. His surreal images are inspired by sources as diverse as dioramas, model train sets, computer games, industrial design, science fiction, Japanese Anime, antique etchings, and romantic landscape paintings, yet bear their own distinct apocalyptic resonance.

If our future lies in navigating the world wearing devices that stream a continuous flow of information and communication capabilities, then Alex McLeod and Brendan Tang demonstrate that “the future is already here,”¹⁰ to borrow a phrase from writer William Gibson. The artists are time travelers who explore the fluid borders between cultural styles, juxtapose the historical with the contemporary, and suggest with their eye-catching futuristic works the growing interdependence between man and machine. Despite McLeod and Tang’s very different choices of medium and technique, and the visual autonomy of their independent work, they have much in common. Their work exhibits a fascination with the latest in technology, a willingness and compulsion to appropriate and reinvent, an embrace of artifice and illusion, the use of the pretty and cute to mask an underlying darkness, and above all a recognition that in today’s globalized world the boundaries between high and low culture, distinct artistic styles and media, and ethnic hierarchies and identities will continue to erode.

Rachel Rosenfield Lafo
Guest Curator

¹⁰ This quote is from a William Gibson radio interview on NPR. See NPR Talk of the Nation, 30 November 1999 Timecode: 11min 55sec, Link: discover.npr.org/features/feature.jhtml?wfid=1067220
Also: www.npr.org/run downs/run down.php?prgId=5&prgDate=30-Nov-1999
"The Science in Science Fiction" on Talk of the Nation, NPR (30 November 1999, Timecode 11:55). The phrase also appears in Arthur C. Clarke’s *Rendezvous with Rama*, Bantam Books, NY, first published 1973, Bantam edition, 1990, p. 201.

Rachel Rosenfield Lafo is an independent curator, writer, and consultant currently based in Vancouver, BC. Prior to moving to Canada, Lafo worked as the Director of Curatorial Affairs at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Lincoln Massachusetts from 2001-2008. Recent curatorial projects include *Michelle Allard and Khan Lee: Circulation Patterns* and *Drive-By: Danny Singer* at the Seymour Gallery. In conjunction with the Tang-McLeod exhibition, Lafo has also just launched another curatorial project in Montreal: *Dave Eppley-Taches d'huile* that runs until February 16 2013 at Oboro.

Alex McLeod was born in Scarborough, Ontario (1984), attended George Brown College, Toronto and is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art & Design Painting and Drawing program. After graduation McLeod began to explore 3D rendering software and now creates C-prints of fantastical and romantic landscapes, both candy-coated and darkly whimsical. He has been exhibiting these virtual installations since the fall of 2008. In 2009 he successfully invaded the blog world and caught the attention of hip-hop artist Kanye West. McLeod has exhibited worldwide at MASS MoCA in North Adams, MA, rojo®artspace in Barcelona, and cities including Toronto, Montreal, Miami, San Jose, and Sao Paulo. He has received awards from the Toronto Art Council and has works in public collections including the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, and BMO Financial Group. McLeod is represented by Angell Gallery in Toronto and Galerie Trois Points in Montreal.

Brendan Lee Satish Tang was born in Dublin Ireland (1975) of Trinidadian parents and is a naturalized citizen of Canada. He earned his formal art education at Malaspina University College, Nanaimo, BC, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, and Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. Tang has lectured at conferences and academic institutions across the country, and his professional practice has also taken him to India, Trinidad, and Japan. He has been a resident artist at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts, Helena, MT and participated in an international residency at the European Ceramic Work Centre in 's-Hertogenbosch, NL in 2011. He was a 2012 finalist for the RBC Emerging Artist People's Choice Award. Tang's work has been showcased at museums and galleries including the Seattle Art Museum, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (as a Sobey Finalist 2010), and the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon. Tang is represented by Gallery Jones in Vancouver.

Front Cover Image: Brendan Tang, *Manga Ormolu 5.0-c*, 2009, ceramic and mixed media, 40.64 x 27.94 cm., collection, Kamloops Art Gallery; Brendan Tang, *Manga Ormolu 4.0-n*, 2012, ceramic and mixed media, 58.4 x 25.4 x 30.5 cm., courtesy of the artist and Gallery Jones; Alex McLeod, *Cloudbirth*, 2012, chromogenic print on photographic paper, 121.9 x 121.9 cm., courtesy of the artist and Angell Gallery.

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