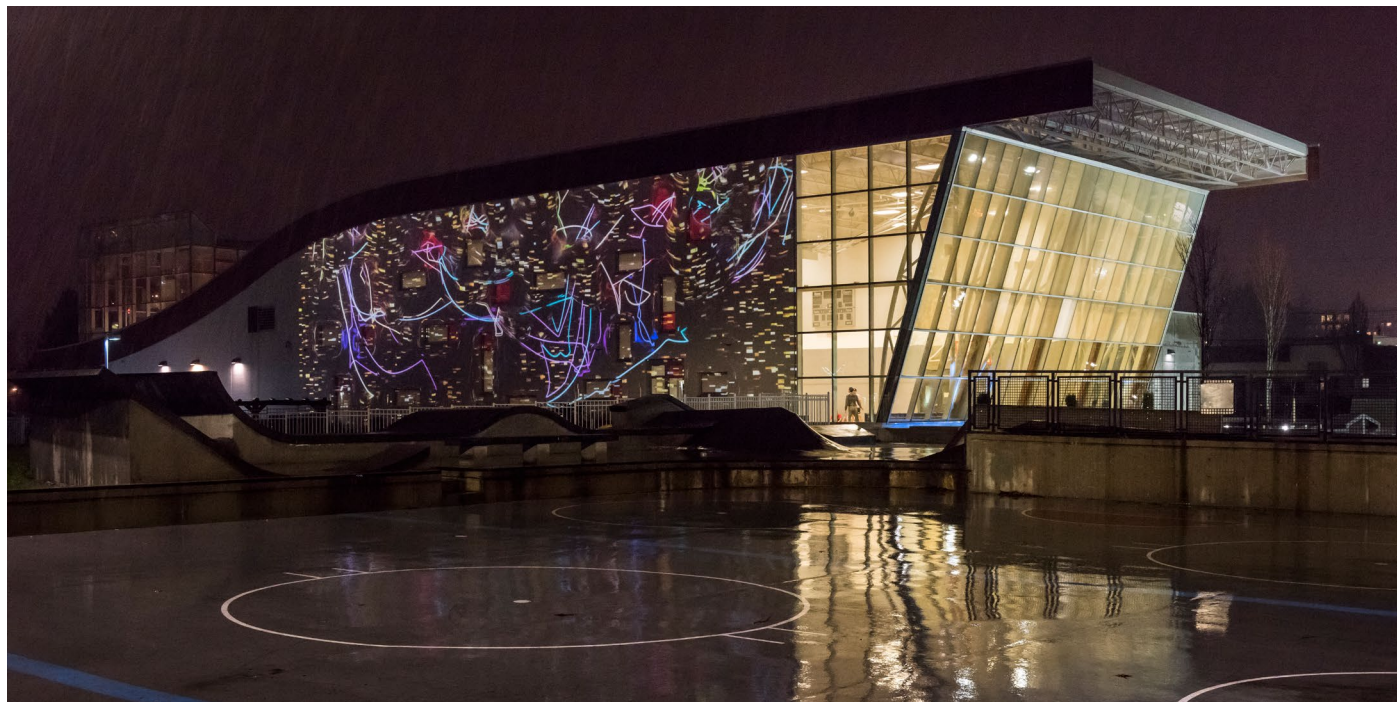


Alex McLeod

PHANTASMAGORIA



Looking to Connect: Alex McLeod's PHANTASMAGORIA
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Alex McLeod
PHANTASMAGORIA, 2018

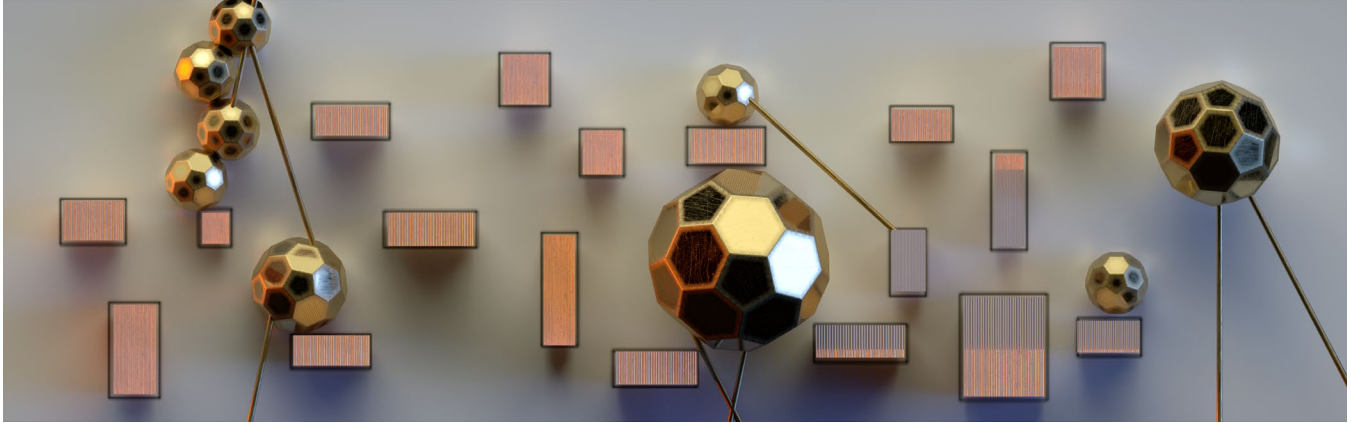
digital animation

Photograph by Brian
Giebelhaus

Looking to Connect: Alex McLeod's PHANTASMAGORIA
Sky Goodden

Expanding and reducing, Alex McLeod's *PHANTASMAGORIA* pulsates, weaves, spins, and reaches. It is at once infinitesimal and universal, analytical and reflective. And in it, we see ourselves reflected.

Often considered an early contributor to "post-internet art"—a genre that self-consciously emulates the aesthetic and function of online media—McLeod



Animation still from *PHANTASMAGORIA*. Image courtesy of the artist.

stepped to the side of a limiting association and freely embraced interpretive landscapes in the digital realm. His recent work has evolved his practice from “magic-eye” abstractions to 3D-printed installation and sculpture—and now, to the moving image. McLeod has established himself as a foregrounding digital renderer with a practice that consistently bends the tools of digital image-making to picture the splendour of fully-realized realms. What used to appear as diorama-like figurations and videogame landscapes transcended what he once laughingly referred to as “stoner art,”¹ and came to illustrate scenes of portent. Machinist, Kafkaesque dominions and industrial wastelands were vaguely evoked, as the artist “imagined what another world or space and time may look like.” However, even when picturing his subjects in mid-render—some pixels poking through, and the focus pivoting between process and resolution—McLeod has always lent image to the activity of imagining something yet to come.

In McLeod’s project for Surrey Art Gallery’s offsite venue UrbanScreen, *PHANTASMAGORIA* (2018), a loop of moving images emphasize the energetic locus of that imagining. Evoking themes as diverse (and comprehensive) as simulation, chance, evolution,

and cellular diffusion, McLeod is both abstracting and literalizing the act of perception, and the source of existence. Taking his cue from motion-capture technology, he’s creating photographic images that promote fictions on the level of fact. Isolating and zooming in on unique particles (which, up close, take on the quality of protagonists in a story), his subjects are, at turns, curious-looking, friendly, shy, and mischievous. Indeed, these “particles” have the character of one who’s “looking back.” In this sense, even computationally, there remains a legible and empathetic gesture within these all-essential forms.

In *The Object Stares Back* (1997), art historian James Elkins writes, “The world is full of eyes, and sight is everywhere. But there is a special category, another kind of eye that is neither real (like my eyes) nor metaphorical (like the ‘eyes’ of rainbows and halos). It sees, and yet it is blind.”² Here, Elkins is referring to creatures that grow fake eyes as a form of self-defense. Other creatures are fearful of the (perceived) eye, and would stay away if they thought their actions—i.e., preying—were being observed. However, this examination of the “blind eye” should extend to the non-organic among us, too. Because, “in most images from science and technology, the

'eye'—that is, the machine that helps out the eye—needs to send out something in order to make the object visible." So, like a photographer employing a flash, or a scientist charging a surface in order to view his sulfur atoms, there is, on a very basic level, the object's need for our vision in order to exist.

Even in an age populated by pedestrianized imagery and photographic editing, a "truth-telling status" continues to be applied to visual phenomena. Art historian and mythographer Marina Warner reminds us that, despite the fact that "we cannot think without pictures, [...] these do not always represent objects that exist in the sensory world."³ As art historians can readily attest, generational instruments have been created "to analyze and reproduce vision." The camera lucida is chief among them. Like a photographic double-exposure, the camera lucida was a Renaissance-era optical device crafted to superimpose the artist's subject onto the plane on which he was drawing. Warner reminds

us that parallel objects or optical strategies exist for every generation of observers, reflecting ideas about consciousness in any given period. These devices express "the potential of the inward eye for every generation, the concepts of cognition and mental projection, and the irrepressible tendency of the mind to assemble random marks into intelligible data."⁴

McLeod is a pioneer of image analysis and visualizing himself, and deservedly holds a prominent position within the digital envisaging community, both in Canada and abroad. However, what elevates his work to the level of contemporary art—beyond mere technological design or experiment—is the level of feeling that he lines his subjects with. Whether his landscapes communicate humour, portent, or mischief, McLeod foregrounds an important—and even ominous—aspect of digital imaging: that we are creating something of ourselves.



Installation view of *PHANTASMAGORIA*. Photo by Brian Giebelhaus.

In a 2015 text on McLeod, a critic references a specialized term, “cubusolus,” which pairs the Ancient Greek “cubus” (a mass, quantity) with the Latin “solus” (alone, by oneself) to mean “an existential awareness produced in digital isolation,” or “a sublime encounter from a solitary digital perspective.”⁵ It’s hard to conjure a better term for the emotional tenor with which McLeod imbues his digital imaging. *PHANTASMAGORIA* reduces—or elevates—figuration to its essential parts, and, via the particle or the pixel, speaks to the connective tissue that exists between these forms and also between us. Whether McLeod’s subjects take the shape of golden amoebas congealing and separating from one another; ribbed globes emanating and pulsating data; or pebbled planes reaching out with string, his forms speak on the level of metaphor and existential motif. On the lids of our eyes, such images play out as if on an interior projection. On the petri dish, molecules perform a similar dance, telling us about both the micro and macro of organic existence. Across green screens and Bluetooths, data multiplies, synthesizes, and foretells. In this way, McLeod’s formulation arrives in terms we can understand: we are so many protean particles, looking to connect.

Notes

1. Goodden, Sky. “Alumni Profile: Alex McLeod.” *Sketch Magazine*, Summer 2012: p22, OCAD University.
2. Elkins, James. *The Object Stares Back*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1997.
3. Warner, Marina, in *Eyes, Lies and Illusion: The Art of Deception*, Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2004.
4. Ibid.
5. Corsano, Otino, “All That Is Solid ...: Alex McLeod Taps the Cult of the Canadian Sublime and Explodes the Digital,” *Momus.ca* (<http://momus.ca/all-that-is-solid-alex-mcleod-taps-the-cult-of-the-canadian-sublime-and-explodes-the-digital/>), Oct. 7, 2015.

Exhibition Statement

Rhys Edwards

For UrbanScreen, McLeod has developed a lens-based animation for projection onto the west wall of Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre. His art uses digital software to render imagery that moves between two and three-dimensional space, dissolving the façade between our own physical world and the imagined possibilities of elsewhere. In a constant game of elaboration, McLeod's subjects remind us of the rules which govern our reality before breaking them in a colourful display of artifice.

McLeod's subjects include impossible geometric constructions, vivid textures, and discontented (yet charming) creatures, drawn from a vibrant virtual world. These components are composed in an ever-evolving series of animated tableaux that playfully experiment with physics, light, and form. All the while, McLeod invites viewers to observe the struggles of the beings who inhabit these fantastic realms, reflecting upon our own projected desires and egos in the process.

About the Artist

Alex McLeod is a new media visual artist whose images recall the wide-open vistas of romantic landscape painting, and strange otherworldly dystopias. He uses film as a point of comparison, such as the representation of space, captured in films such as *Kagemusha* and *Hidden Fortress*, then contrasted with the hypothesized future depicted in films like *Blade Runner*. In light of concerns surrounding rising populations, urban over-development, and climate change, McLeod's simulations could be considered a cautionary tale

about ecological responsibility. Based in Toronto, he is represented by Division Gallery in Toronto and Montreal.

About the Writer

Sky Goodden is the founding publisher and editor of *Momus*, an international online art publication that stresses a return to art criticism. *Momus* has been critically recognized, and widely read and shared, receiving citations from peer publications including *Frieze*, *e-flux*, *The New Inquiry*, and the *LA Times*, among others. The publication was shortlisted for two International Art Criticism Awards in 2016. Upon its third anniversary in October 2017, *Momus* has grown an audience of over 700,000 readers, two-thirds of whom are based in the US and abroad. It is now producing a podcast titled *Momus: The Podcast* (the series is being syndicated by the popular, UK-based NTS Radio), and has published its first print compendium, titled *Momus: A Return to Art Criticism Vol. 1 (2014-17)*. Goodden holds an art history BFA from Concordia University and an MFA in Criticism & Curatorial Practice from OCAD University, which in 2016 awarded her with an Alumni of Influence Award, "The Trailblazer." She has published in *Modern Painters*, *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, the *National Post*, and *Art21*, among others.



About UrbanScreen

Imagined by artists and built by the City, Surrey's UrbanScreen is Canada's largest non-commercial outdoor urban screen dedicated to presenting digital and interactive art. UrbanScreen is an offsite venue of the Surrey Art Gallery and is located on the west wall of Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre in City Centre. The venue can be viewed from SkyTrain, between Gateway and Surrey Central stations. Exhibitions begin 30 minutes after sunset and end at midnight.

UrbanScreen was made possible by the City of Surrey Public Art Program, with support from the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Surrey Art Gallery Association, and the BC Arts Council Unique Opportunities Program, and is a legacy of the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad project CODE. Surrey Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges funding support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of BC through the BC Arts Council for its ongoing programming. UrbanScreen's 2015 equipment renewal was made possible by the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage / Government of Canada and the City of Surrey.

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