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Xpace Cultural Centre
2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
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The Emotional Problems of Living

Tobias Williams

Curated by Adrienne Crossman

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Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.
-Phillip K Dick

Tobias Williams' *The Emotional Problems of Living* was created as part of an installation at the Roundtable Residency¹ in the summer of 2014. The piece is an exploration into the relationship between physical and digital objects and the spaces they inhabit.

Williams is attracted to the new permeability between actual physical space and notional digital space, questioning how we view things in a post-Photoshop world in which data visualization and 3D rendering pervade the collective contemporary consciousness. Upon creating the work, Williams wanted to explore the relationship between three-dimensional physical space and the digital process in a way that an audience would intuitively understand.

An indefinitely looping video of a digitally rendered three-dimensional environment portrays a computer generated scene displaying an animated still life composed of ambiguous objects. Upon initial view it can be difficult to forge connections between the various components on display; a Commodore 64 monitor draped in a Chanel scarf illuminates the rest of the frame, while three origami unicorns sit to the left, and two ambiguous large white geometric shapes frame the scene. Finally the protagonist, a blob-

¹ The Roundtable Residency is a peer mentored summer residency program held at the Dragon Academy, an alternative high school located in downtown Toronto.

like being, sits in the forefront and watches the monitor's screen. Upon further examination of these individual components, associations become clearer, revealing the depth and breadth of the conceptual terrain in which Williams works.

While completing his MFA, Williams began working with 3D scanning software, creating physical models and scanning them, resulting in digital 3D renderings. In scanning a variety of objects such as skulls, busts, and blob forms, he found the blobs to be the most malleable of the shapes. They could easily be manipulated, and provided flexibility in contextualizing the overall meaning of the work. This process opened up what was previously a barrier for Williams, a way to negotiate the divide between digital and physical space.

Williams' initial blob "models" are created with expanding foam, a type of polyurethane used for insulation. They are then brought into synthetic digital space (via 3D scanning), at which point the artist personalizes them by assigning individual attributes such as accessories, texture, hair, and colour, then places them in uniquely rendered environments. The blob-forms represent a halfway point between anthropomorphic and geometric shapes, each possessing their own personality and environment resulting in a digital contemporary still life.

Located directly in the center of the frame of the video is a Commodore 64 monitor draped with a Chanel scarf. It is unclear whether the scarf is meant to represent a true Chanel piece or a counterfeit. Williams has played with the idea of counterfeit objects in other works, and this uncertainty brings further attention to the ambiguous nature of authenticity. The monitor suggests a technological nostalgia iconic of 1980s computing; the Commodore 64 holds the record for being the best-selling personal computer to date.² The colour sequence displayed on the monitor's screen is composed of a wide spectrum of colours fading in and out seamlessly. Originally programmed by Williams to cut between the solid R, G and B channels, Cinema 4D – the software used to animate the work – automated transitions between the three colours. This result proved to be far more interesting to Williams, demonstrating a very basic example of Artificial

² Griggs, Brandon. "The Commodore 64, That '80s Computer Icon, Lives Again." *CNN*. 9 May 2011. Web.

Intelligence; the software making an assumption on what the user would prefer, and, in turn, altering the result from what it was originally told.

In the bottom left corner of the screen there are three origami unicorns; one red, one blue, one green, alluding, once again, to the RGB colour model. The unicorns are a direct reference to a specific plot tool used in the director's cut of the 1980's cyberpunk film *Blade Runner*. The film, originally based on Phillip K Dick's 1960's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, recounts a science fiction narrative set within a dystopian future version of Los Angeles in which highly sophisticated bio-robotic androids, referred to as Replicants, exist. Unicorn symbolism is used throughout the film to imply to viewers that the protagonist, originally believed to be human, may in fact be a Replicant himself. The film's ending is ambiguous, leaving us to question what it means to be alive and how much of a difference exists between reality and simulation, a theme that is ever present in the Williams' work.

The large geometric shapes that frame the scene in *Emotional Problems* reference a type of polyhedron – a three-dimensional solid consisting of a collection of polygons, often joined at their edges – known as *Dürer's Solid*. The origin of their name comes from a particular geometric shape featured in *Melancholia I*, a mid-century engraving by the German artist, mathematician and philosopher Albrecht Dürer. Although widely contested, the meaning of Dürer's *Melancholia I* and the symbolism within it is still unknown, and Williams is drawn to the work's ambiguity. Dürer's focus on geometry and how it has served as a through-line point of interest from renaissance art into modern day computer graphics and 3D digital technologies has been a topic of interest for Williams within his practice.

The Emotional Problems of Living, much like Williams' larger practice, is packed full of pop culture and sub cultural references and artifacts, layered with symbolism and meaning. When asked whether it was important that each reference is understood by the audience, Williams said it doesn't matter too much either way:

“*Melancholia I* appeals to me because everything feels loaded – meaning, intention, specificity – but it is impossible to understand. Even if you knew its meaning then, it’s impossible to know now”

-Adrienne Crossman