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Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE

Review: *Tucker Stilley at Monte Vista Projects*
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'As a result of a terrible experimental grey magik experiment gone wrong, Mystr S. Mole, once a famed omni-media mekka battle-bot, un-requited rock star and amateur thought-experiment physicist was stricken with an insidious incurable fatal disease that will leave him little more than a throbbing paralyzed husk , kept alive by machines, a brain in a jar....'

So begins the tale of NewJack Rasputin, alter ego to multimedia artist Tucker Stilley, as told in the comic book that accompanies Stilley's extraordinary exhibition at Monte Vista Projects. An energetic mélange of digitally compiled imagery , photographs, drawings, found images, maps, charts and other graphics, and enigmatic fragments of narration, the book chronicles the ailing Mole's seclusion and subsequent transformation, after months of lonely labor, fierce and forlorn, into the triumphant figure of NewJack, a super hero cripple pixel jockey whose tentacles reach deep into the interwebs.

Though laced with keen, ironic humor, it is a tale of existential proportions, detailing a struggle not only with the body but also with the fundamental conditions of reality: time, space, matter, consciousness, and identity. 'You'll have to go deep inside to survive' one of the book's many voices intones, and the gravity of the ordeal is palpable, however playful the language.

The disease in question, or at least its real-world corollary, is ALS (Lou Geri's disease), which has rendered Stilley almost completely paralyzed. The exhibition and the comic book are but two facets of a larger project, ***The Permanent Record of NewJack Rasputin***, collected under the aegis of a website bearing the same name, which Stilley maintains through the use of specially designed tools and software. He controls a cursor using a mouse-like device that adheres to his forehead and responds to the motions of his head.

The goal is nothing short of the creation, via technology, of a second, better-functioning, less vulnerable body. As Stilley himself explains on the site, with characteristic wit: 'I needed to make some kind of rack to hang my dear old life on. Convinced me to spread my dear old life across the web, hither and thither and yonder.'

Curated by Sam Durant, a friend of Stilley, the exhibition is part installation, part interactive performance. The walls are covered with digital prints of various sizes, rendered in a loose, lively, collage-like style similar to that of the comic book, as well as passages of printed text, fragments of his own conversation, primarily, as spoken through a computer. The interactive element comes by way of a monitor with a live feed to Stilley's residence in San Marino, where he has remained during gallery hours through the duration of the show, watching the activity in the gallery via surveillance camera, making work, demonstrating his methods and chatting with anyone who wishes to communicate. The gallery calls it a virtual residency.

The exhibition, however, is just the tip of the iceberg, a material expression of the imaginative universe encompassed by the vast and labyrinthine website. There you'll find the comic book in its entirety, available for download as a PDF, and an additional selection of digital drawings, but also a great deal of music and sound work, a blog, a strange and haunting podcast tracking the journey of NewJack and his companions, and a marvelous collection of videos made over the last 15 years or so, predating and spanning Stilley's illness.

The videos run a broad gamut, from impressionistic visual poetry to sci-fi narrative to political satire to music video to straight documentary to the distinctly uncategorizable, and all are well worth a perusal. It is, all in all, a profoundly ambitious enterprise: a restless inquiry into the nature of existence, informed by limitations more extreme than most have to deal with but addressing questions we all face ultimately, and that art should be addressing more often than it does. What is this place? Why are we here? What is this body? How are we to weather the body's deterioration? What do we leave behind? Stilley raises the questions with urgency and humor, and with a deeply engaging poetic sensibility.

-- Holly Myers

Monte Vista Projects, 5442 Monte Vista St., L.A., through May 3.

Above: "Evil Propellers Resurrected," archival inkjet print. Credit: Monte Vista Projects