

## What is real?

“Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.”  
Albert Einstein

“We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are.”  
Anais Nin



In our search to understand ourselves and the world around us, we are drawn towards believing the mediated image – whether in news reports, reality TV shows, documentary films, or photographs. But we know, especially with digital technology, how simple it is to manipulate images. As special effects and other forms of deception become more sophisticated, we can’t help but become more easily deceived, yet also more suspicious. What is fact? What is fiction?

Reality is a construction, a story we each uniquely write with our personal perceptions. Images, sound and language are all forms of representation that interpret the world. The more mediated images saturate our environment, the more they become our world, and trouble our sense of what is truthful. Artists have always been interested in how their work represents an experience of the world, yet can also deconstruct how and what we see.

*Fiction non Fiction* visitors may find themselves experiencing a double-take while looking at this exhibit. Adad Hannah’s artworks at first appear to be still photographs, unless one lingers to discover they are videos. David Hoffos’ video, *Disaster* reveals some sleight of hand techniques used to create persuasive disaster movies. But the work also raises questions about how easily we might be persuaded to believe “faked” documentaries, used to prove events that may not, in “reality,” have happened.

Kelly Mark’s *Hiccup* looks as though it was created using digital special effects until one learns otherwise. Instead, five different videos, shot on five different days, document a choreographed performance. They are simply synchronized to play at the exact same time. David Carter’s twin photographs entitled *Pseudocide* have the dramatic scale and power of both a Hollywood horror movie and a billboard advertisement. Only when you leave the exhibit, do you see the behind the scenes of the artist’s performance – the do-it-yourself apparatus used for its “special effects” production.

Jeremy Turner’s avatar project *Voice of Fire 2006* and Jane Irwin’s installation *Janie Jones* explore virtual reality and virtual identities made plausible using Internet technology. Turner employs a chat room environment to create an animated parody of a famous abstract painting. *Voice of Fire 2006* can engage in real time conversations, answering questions about modern art and life in cyberspace. Irwin’s *Janie Jones* blurs the distinction between fiction and non-fiction employing a regularly updated blog, as well as real and faux artifacts from the alternative music scene. This artwork’s story continues to unravel the “fictional” disappearance of Janie, concurrent with the “factual” absence of women from the history of punk rock.

Liane Davison  
Curator of Exhibitions & Collections

*Fiction non Fiction* is on exhibit at the Surrey Art Gallery  
September 16 – November 5, 2006



## *Works in the Fiction non Fiction exhibition*



### **David Carter:**

*Pseudocide*, 2006, 2 colour photographs

---

David Carter, an avid moviegoer, is particularly interested in the genre of horror movies. *Pseudocide* is a self-portrait inspired by a scene of fake suicide by hanging, in the popular 1989 black comedy, *The Heathers*. The life-sized figure of the artist, and the especially selected Eames chair, are carefully positioned and lit, almost as product shots. The second photograph, only visible to the Gallery visitor when they turn around, faces the first image, and shows the artist from behind. Revealed in this second photo are the apparatus used to create the illusion of the artist hanging. Carter wanted the portrait to be deceptive, to look as real as possible, yet to deliberately reveal the “trick” of its harness and hardware in the second photo. In talking about the work, Carter also references the influence of shows such as *Fear Factor*, and other current “reality” television programs.

Images of violence, whether on TV, in video games or other forms of media, is troubling, particularly if it affects our perception of “real” violence. In his essay, *The Return to Ritual: Violence and Art in the Media Age*, Tobin Siebers writes “the notion that violence serves as an index of culture is an idea with us at least since the Romantic age, when Rousseau first charted the nature-culture split and Wordsworth summoned images of a benevolent nature by which to measure the aggressive tendencies of society.” Siebers proposes “trauma art” produces emblems of culture, and at the same time records the changing function of art within our culture. He says, “Increasingly, we are attracted to art forms and entertainments that make fathoming the distinction between real and artificial violence an urgent but baffling task.”



### **Adad Hannah:**

*Tribute, Guided and Crying*, 2002, digital video, 5 minutes, silent

---

The digital videos, *Tribute*, *Guided*, and *Crying* were filmed in 2002 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts with the permission of the Museum. They are from a series of silent videos collectively titled *Stills*. Reviews of the *Stills* have referred to them as the media equivalent of trompe-l'oeil, or called brain tricks, or trompe-le cerveau. They are not illusions though. They are tableaux vivants, a contemporary form of image creation, first popularized in the nineteenth century. Models were posed in positions, often influenced by historic paintings and sculptures, to be viewed as though a still life.

In 2004 Hannah wrote, “These silent videos, most between 5 and 15 minutes in length, read more like photographs than videos. They have neither been altered nor slowed down; one watches stillness in real-time. During these almost static pieces, the viewer is allowed the luxury of letting their eyes roam around the image. The slight movements of the human body breathing, blinking and shifting weight, provide subtle clues that the models are trying to remain motionless... In *Stills*, viewers become acutely aware of the performers’ presence. Their being upstages their performance. The implied movement in these tableaux, the illusion of the captured moment, becomes an aide to the dismantling of the image. *Stills* force the viewer to rethink their relationship to video and photography.



**David Hoffos:**

*Disaster*, 2000, video with stereo sound, duration: 3:09 minutes

---

Hoffos's artworks use simple tools and strategies known by generations of filmmakers, to slightly shift our perception and create an enchanted or altered reality. *Disaster*, is a kind of documentary, recording a performance of one of his installations. The apparent destruction of a small community by a series of horrific events, is accompanied by a haunting soundtrack, fuelling its emotional drama. Significantly, the video identifies the "set"

and its construction of toys and mirrors, as well as the artist directing the film's crew to perform the "action." While *Disaster* is artful in its imagination and complexity, it asks questions both of our culture's fascination with images of trauma, and whether the documentaries of what we may believe are "real" disasters are always true.

Hoffos writes: "Through my installation work I have sought to reveal and examine the sources of illusion found within genre movies, stage magic, theme park attractions, 19<sup>th</sup> century parlours, and museum displays. The evolution of my work has been a steady process of accumulating and inventing techniques and devices and then applying and refining them. Over the course of more than 20 installations my work has developed step-by-step from simple, stand-alone film/sculpture pieces into complex, immersive, multi-channel environments. A few of the techniques and devices that characterize my work include: film and video projection onto cut-outs, large miniature scenes, mirrored boxes, phantom figure illusions, ghost video glass effects, cineramas, homemade video projectors, and curtained entrances." "Disaster was assembled from 16 mm footage shot for my installation *Catastrophe*. This is a boy's own toy destroying "Fisher-Price disaster", poking fun at the excesses of Hollywood's spectaculars. In a lakeside suburb made of toys, buses speed into head-on collision, an earthquake topples buildings, a plane crashes, a tidal wave surges up out of the lake, explosions start fires. The film crew makes periodic appearances, executing the one-take camera shot."



**Jane Irwin:**

*Janie Jones*, 2006, installation with sound, blog, artefacts, limited edition wallpaper and photographs

---

Who was Janie Jones, and what happened to her? This artwork "fights back" against a history that neglects to remember the role women have played in the alternative music scene. Its room-sized installation, designed to resemble an archive's exhibit, acts out the careful preservation of traces of a woman who vanished. Her career is

remembered in the album covers, diary entries, letters and notes, photographs and objects that indicate her life and work as a post punk rock musician. Janie Jones serves as a metaphor for many other women artists who participated in the punk rock scene in the late 1970s-early 80s. The artist's limited edition toile wallpaper decoratively frames black and white portraits of selected "punk" or alternative women music artists such as Debbie Harry, Poly Styrene, Poison Ivy, Siouxsie Sioux and Ari-Up. Visitors can listen to a CD, or scroll through an active online blog ([www.janiejones1979.blogspot.com](http://www.janiejones1979.blogspot.com)) centred on the discovered "archives" of "lost" punk rock artist Janie Jones. It appears that the history (fact and fiction) of Janie Jones continues to be written.

The artist writes: "Some would argue that punk was long dead by 1980 but various tribes and sub sects continued to exist in new forms, with each group identified by their own distinct social signifiers. At the age of 16 I had found a likeminded community centred on political discourse expressed through the language of art and music. The obvious way to participate would have been to form a band, but subliminally influenced by the evident gender bias in the punk scene, it never occurred to me that I could

stand on that stage and play the guitar. Despite really cool Vancouver role models like Mary Jo Kopechne of the Modernettes and bands like the Dishrags I never learned to play guitar and instead found my voice through art. Like Kathleen Hanna (prior to becoming one of the most talented and inspirational women in music) I was "...a self described "band girlfriend" which in the '80s meant living vicariously through your boyfriend's bands." Sad but true."



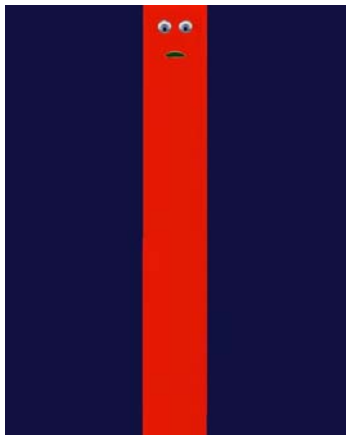
### **Kelly Mark:**

***Hiccup #2***, 2003, 5 channel DVD, duration: 15 minutes each, silent

*Hiccup #2* is the second in a series of videos using imagery that documents a multi-day performance by the artist. Each performance consists of simple, everyday actions, repeated with the exact same timing each day, videotaped from across the street. *Hiccup #2*'s five-day performance was sited in front of Birmingham, England's Central Library. The final artwork is exhibited on multiple screens, so each movement of the artist is

synchronized to occur at the same time, from monitor to monitor. However, everything surrounding the artist is different – different people come and go, traffic and the weather varies.

Mark writes: "Conceived as an orchestrated "ballet of the ordinary", the work pivots on the play of two differentiated timelines: my standardized routine of carefully choreographed body movements, juxtaposed against the limitless variables of the everyday world... I smoked a cigarette, took sips from my coffee, looked to the left, stretched my leg, adjusted my hat, read the same 5 pages from a book and underlined the same passage etc.... Although appearing to be moving and acting in a completely natural and spontaneous way I was, in fact, with the aid of a pre-recorded and timed audio track on headphones, completing the exact same actions and gestures every day at exactly the same time."



### **Jeremy Turner:**

***Voice of Fire 2006***, avatar

The *Voice of Fire 2006* is a chat room avatar. Its form and colour parodies a famous painting named *Voice of Fire*, by Barnett Newman, owned by the National Gallery of Canada. The painting's purchase in 1989 caused a furore, as people were challenged to understand why almost 2 million dollars was spent on its acquisition. Those in the art community were, in turn, challenged to explain the value of monumental abstract painting. Turner's *Voice of Fire 2006* is, in many ways, a reincarnation of heroic abstraction, with the advantages of cyberspace. Unlike monumental acrylic paintings, this digital artwork is not quiet, nor can it be fully experienced with silent contemplation. It is chatty, pixilated, projected, animated and can only be interactive online. For those familiar with chat room

technology, it won't be news that this territory of digital technology within the Internet has come to be considered (and experienced) as a very real realm. Communities are discovered and are built in chat rooms, and participants' avatars are designed or selected to best represent one's online life form. In some ways, creating and animating an avatar in a chat room may be similar to acting as the Wizard of Oz, behind the curtain of the Internet.

### **Artist Statement**

"*Painting, like passion, is a living voice which, when I hear it, I must let it speak, unfettered.*"

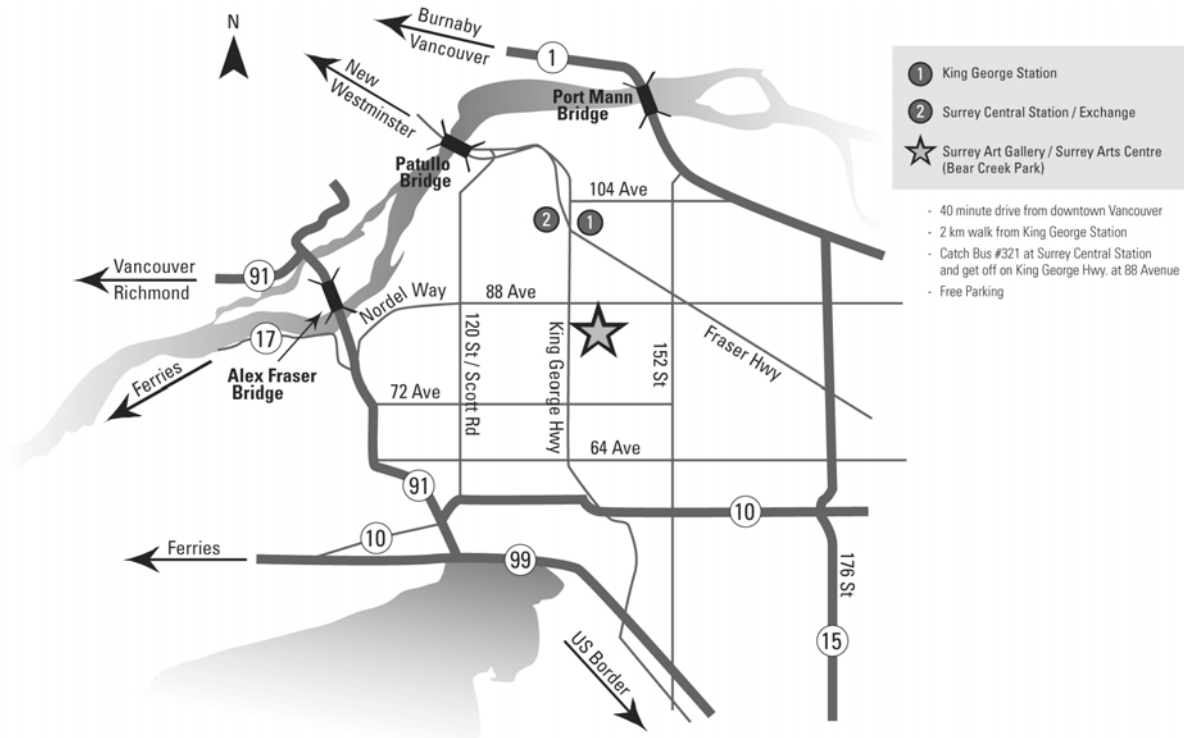
- Barnett Newman, MOMA's New American Painting exhibition catalogue, 1959.

Based on this quote, it appears to be the case that the American Abstract Expressionist/Colour field painter, Barnett Newman believed that his art was truly alive and had a sublime sentient voice all its own. Newman insisted that his artwork had all of the autonomous aesthetic authority necessary to speak directly to the art viewer about its existence without the aid of an interpreter or critic. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one particular painting of his, *Voice of Fire* (1967), has finally come to life in the literal sense. The original *Voice of Fire* is a very tall and vertical red stripe (avatar) in the middle of a pure blue field (virtual space). The *Voice of Fire 2006* appears in avatar form online to chat candidly and heroically with the gallery audience about everything from art theory to casual gossip and even its controversial tenure at the National Gallery of Art in Ottawa. Unlike his original painting incarnation, this new and improved online *Voice of Fire 2006* will inhabit a fully interactive cyberspace environment where up to 19 other avatar participants could occupy the blue-field and provide their own virtual commentary about the existence of this living and speaking art-entity.

The Surrey Art Gallery is located at 13750 - 88 Avenue,  
 1 block east of King George Hwy. in Bear Creek Park.  
 604-501-5566 [artgallery@surrey.ca](mailto:artgallery@surrey.ca)

[www.arts.surrey.ca](http://www.arts.surrey.ca)      [www.surreytechlab.ca](http://www.surreytechlab.ca)

Admission to exhibitions in the Gallery and TechLab is by donation.  
 Hours: Monday & Friday: 9am–5pm; Tuesday to Thursday: 9am–9pm;  
 Saturday: 10am–5pm; Sunday: 12noon–5pm; Closed holidays.



BRITISH  
 COLUMBIA  
 ARTS COUNCIL  
 Supported by the Province of British Columbia



Canada Council  
 for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
 du Canada

