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Pratt Artists Reimagine Our

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Perceptions

World through the Lens

by Harris Solomon

Imagine your adrenaline pumping, explosions happening around you, and the whiz of flying bullets while you ready your camera for the perfect shot. But you're not a war photographer, as you might readily imagine. Rather, you're taking pictures inside a video game. Your subject? Not the other players surrounding you, or the violent scene unfolding, but rather, the landscape.

While this may sound surreal, it is a typical experience for Visiting Assistant Professor of Digital Arts Justin Berry, whose digital photographs explore the often-overlooked "natural" settings in which some of the world's most popular video games unfold. He is one of a wave of Pratt artists who have chosen to train their lenses on moments and places that we don't readily dwell on, drawing our attention to and playing with our perception of that which is often overlooked in the world around us.

Berry's photographs appear, at first, to document veritable natural landscapes in the style of great nature photographers like Ansel Adams. In reality, Berry records his images by playing first-person fighter games and searching out locations he wants to photograph. Berry will often play a game over and over again in order to return to these places, where he takes multiple screen shots to capture the location in question. While these low-resolution images are fairly flat, Berry gives them definition and depth of field by weaving multiple shots together in Photoshop.

For Berry, toying with our sense of location and perception delivers great satisfaction. "There is power in the gesture of turning away from the game to see what you are not supposed to be looking at," he explains. "You're not looking at the world in terms of the designer's expectations, but rather focusing on the background, the landscape. It asks the viewer to treat the virtual world as a real space, a world with weight and consequence."

Optical Illusions

Berry isn't alone is his goal of heightening our awareness of the spaces we take for granted. Assistant Professor of Photography John Lehr aims to cast a new light on urban surfaces from the commercial landscape, including billboards, shop windows, and signage in his series, Low Relief. However, these aren't average close-ups of city grit. Lehr works to "make the images about the act of looking by showing the viewer a collision of imagery that doesn't immediately register." By photographing flat surfaces and printing them in the exact proportions that he encountered them, Lehr achieves a trompe l'oeil effect, causing the viewer to wonder if he or she is seeing a photograph that shows peeling tape or the peeling tape itself. This profoundly impacts our understanding of the surfaces we see, and makes us more able to appreciate the play of light through a grimy window, or the striations of etching on glass.

In many ways, Lehr attempts to re-create the feeling of discovery that he first had when happening upon the subject of the photograph. "Many people still think about photographs as being an exact image of the world," explains Lehr. "But I'm interested in making pictures occupying a middle ground—photographs that force the viewer to slow down and contemplate the space between an objective view of the world and a subjective rendering of it."

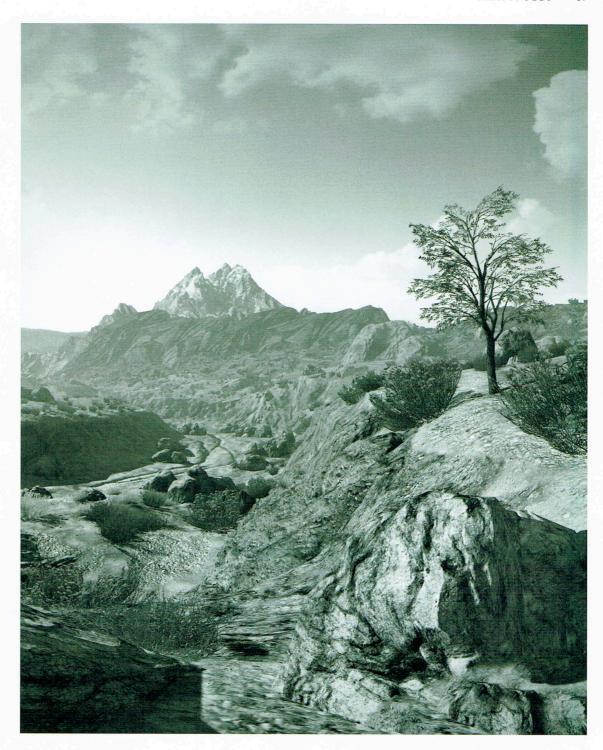
Like Berry, Lehr believes that the contemplative space he creates for those examining his photographs is one free of the associations we carry with us in everyday life. His pictures are links to our world, rather than direct representations of it.

Right: *Auto Body, 201*3 by John Lehr Page 36, top to bottom: *Obelisk* and *Rust Vale* by Justin Berry Page 37: *Dry Gulch* by Justin Berry

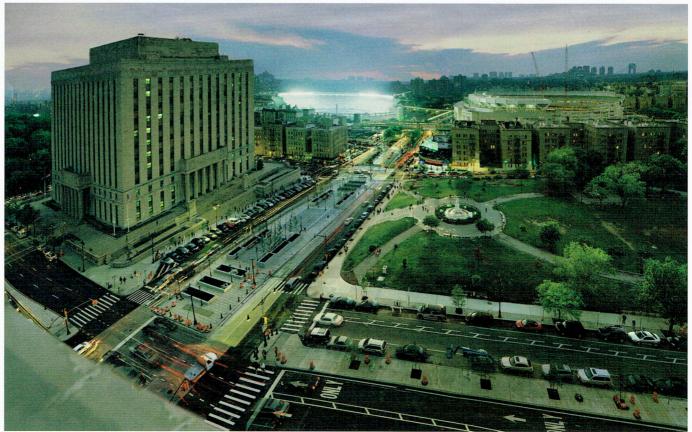












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Constructing the Cityscape

Representing our world is, at first glance, exactly what Pratt alumnus Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao (B.F.A. Photography '03) seems to be doing. His large-scale panoramas of New York, which have been shown everywhere from the J. Paul Getty Museum to the Museum of the City of New York, appear to capture bustling, lively spaces at one particular moment in time, such as Times Square at night or a surge of people in front of the Flatiron Building after Hurricane Sandy. However, Liao, like both Berry and Lehr, plays with the viewer's perception of reality and the documentary nature of photography.

While it may appear that the camera has managed to capture the gestures of everyone in the frame simultaneously, in fact, Liao takes many individual pictures and stitches the frames together to produce a larger image, sometimes using more than 200 shots to create a final scene. These stitched-together panoramas create what seem, at first glance, to be completely plausible cityscapes before we realize their impossibility—the light on the same intersection is both green and red, or two large balloons occupy the same space as they float over the Thanksgiving Day Parade. In certain photographs, the markers are even subtler, such as the differing quality of light and shadow, creating a gradient of twilight across the sky.

Mediating Reality

Whether it's through video games, urban surfaces, or cityscapes, Berry, Lehr, and Liao are examining how, as Lehr puts it, their subjects "are utterly transformed by the medium of photography." All three have all chosen the intermediate space between

documentary photography and the image as fictional representation, and though their aesthetics differ, the similarities in their approaches are clear. Their work is as much about using photography as a medium that can shape people's perception of the world as it is about carefully tweaking what they find to achieve a desired result. Indeed, image manipulation is central to the careful construction of each artist's works, and their processes expand our understanding of what photography is and can be. In fact, the medium has even helped photographers themselves re-envision their role as artists. "I realized that cities are my stage," Liao says. "I could pick and choose moments that I wanted to join together—somewhat like a painter."

Left. top to bottom: Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, New York, 2012 and Yankee Stadiums, Bronx, 2008 by Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao