ART

Finding Connections to Virtual Reality

Chris Finley mixes high and low technology in his efforts to draw viewers into his 3-D world of interactivity.

January 12, 1997 | Hunter Drohojowska Philp | Hunter Drohojowska Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

At 25, Chris Finley is among the first generation of artists to consider his sculpture and painting to be products of virtual reality. The interactivity of the Internet and video games like Super Mario Bros. are his inspirations, much as the Pop artists of the 1960s were influenced by the then-fresh medium of television.

Instead of art history, Finley looks to the possibilities of cyberspace: "I don't think about other art very much when I'm working. I'm more concerned with inventing something."

Even the title of Finley's new exhibition, "Level One," derives from the ratings system Nintendo uses to indicate the first rank of difficulty in a series of video games. His latest works, all designed first on a 3-D modeling program, are hybrids of sculpture and painting and are on view at the ACME Gallery in Santa Monica until Feb. 8.

Seated at a table in the back room of the ACME Gallery, Finley explains his interest in interactivity: "I want to make the viewer feel important. So the work is more than me in a way."

His early "cyber-sculptures" were compared to Russian nesting dolls, containers within containers, each filled with insignificant if amusing flotsam and jetsam.

"I related them to the way a computer functions, the way you can navigate through space and information by clicking and opening windows to get to different levels," Finley says. "The viewer becomes the joystick in a way."

The sculptures--made of cheerfully ordinary materials like colorful Tupperware, plastic trays and bowls, salt and pepper shakers, place mats, doilies, little plastic toys, flowers and hundreds of tiny, hand-whittled pencils--were meant to be disassembled. Instead of standing at a respectful distance, viewers were implicitly invited to go through the layers to discover the quirky contents for themselves.

"I really want to connect," Finley explains. "The work is more about the act of the viewer viewing it."

And what about the scores of tiny pencils? The opposite of high technology, each was made in the exact same way using a utility X-Acto knife.

"[The pencils] came from having nothing to do and feeling the necessity of having to accomplish something," Finley says. "I think it's important to have downtime so I watch TV a lot. But then I feel really guilty so I'd set goals like whittling a 10-pack of pencils a night. At first I didn't know what to do with them so I started to fill containers. I think they're about the layering of time and about storing labor in physical form. I wondered if having that much time in the sculptures affected how we see them."

Finley has square features, disarming dimples and striking coloring--short black hair, dark eyes and pale skin. For an artist whose work relies on viewer participation, Finley is a study in self-possession. He is obviously shy, and his articulated thoughts are measured and weighed. It is as though the organized chaos of his art provides the ballast to a methodical nature.

"There is no story or meaning to my work," he says. "The sculpture was about the act of going through them and figuring out how things were connected."

During the last four years, Finley's work has grown in scale and complexity. In the current exhibition, the viewer no longer gets down on hands and knees to play with knickknacks. "You don't have to take things apart now," he says.

The sculpture inspired a return to painting with an emphasis on illusion.

"I'm originally a painter," he says. "The way the sculptures were built had a lot to do with painting. Matching the colors, getting the exact shapes and forms. They were made the way that I would go about composing a painting. I think the painting I'm doing now is almost the reverse and has more to do with sculpture."

"The painting is about being right in the moment," he continues. His work has metamorphosed into scenes that the viewer may enter as though stepping into virtual reality. Some still hang on walls but also include three-dimensional adjuncts, some of which the viewer can manipulate.

One of the pieces for the ACME exhibition is an 8-by-8-foot room with a 3-foot podium painted to blend in with surrounding space to such an extent that it will disappear if the viewer is standing in the correct spot. The focal center is at 5 feet, 4 inches. Viewers of other heights will need to bend their knees or stand on tiptoe to catch the phenomenon.

"This is a connection between the virtual world and the real world," Finley explains. "The problem with virtual reality is that we know we are in it because we put the headset on. This is a transition between the two."

Finley was introduced to computers during his undergraduate studies at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, where he learned to manipulate design programs.

But the computer became more intrinsic to his work after the 1992 Northridge earthquake when his nesting knickknack containers were on display at the upstart gallery Food House. The hundreds of miniature pencils, fragments and toys were tossed together in the middle of the gallery and no one could figure out how to reassemble them. After that, he used the computer to generate detailed drawings of potential arrangements of the elements in each sculpture.

Even before Finley had graduated from Art Center with his bachelor's degree in 1993, hiscyber-sculptures had started to generate a buzz among collectors and critics. By 1994, his solo show at Food House, now reorganized as ACME, was hailed by Times art critic Christopher Knight: "The forbidding mysteries of high

technology have been wittily transformed into low-tech assemblages of plastic pots and pans."

Finley's quick success led him to reject the common path of young artists--getting a graduate degree.

"I felt like a knew what I needed to know," he says. "I couldn't see going back and dealing with other people's ideas. At Art Center, people would think so much about what they were doing, they couldn't do anything."

Shortly after college, Finley married his high school sweetheart, Kristin Edwards, a kindergarten teacher, and the couple took up residence in their hometown of Petaluma in Northern California. But Finley comes to L.A. every month. Last fall, he came every week as a visiting artist at UCLA's department of art.

"It's a healthy balance for me," Finley says. "Up there, I hibernate. I become a hermit. Down here I teach and get involved. But if it's one way or the other for too long, I start fumbling."

Like many artists, Finley knew his chosen career path from childhood. By high school, he was taking art classes at the local junior college. His father, a loan officer, was interested in art and painted cartoon characters for him as a child. Both parents were supportive of their son's ambitions. Before attending Art Center, Finley had thought his role models were painters like Picasso and Hans Hoffman. At the college, he recalls, "It was more about talking about painting."

"I've known what I wanted to do for a long time," he says. "I try not to think about me. I don't think the purpose of art is to express all your little secrets and understand yourself. I'm more interested in invention, in making something for people other than myself."

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"LEVEL ONE," Chris Finley. ACME Gallery, 1800-B Berkeley St., Santa Monica. Dates: Tuesdays through Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Ends Feb. 8. Phone: (310) 264-5818.