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EDDO STERN

POSTMASTERS

Among the more provocative essays published after September 11 was Slavoj Žižek's "Welcome to the Desert of the Real," which suggested that Americans would have to renegotiate their relationship with spectacular culture after Al Qaeda attacks forced the rupture of our seamless, unbearably light, endlessly entrancing mediascape. Whatever has happened along these lines in mass culture, it's worth asking whether any such shift has taken place in New York art production, particularly in pieces most obviously inflected by today's agitated political climate. For example, Thomas Hirschhorn's stunning installation at Barbara Gladstone Gallery might suggest the answer is no. The Swiss artist's massive cave made of wood and duct tape kept to seductive blueprints belonging to installations of the '90s boom: a low-tech, narrative style, mapping, in part, contemporary politics onto an immersive environment with spectacular architectural roots. On the other end of the spectrum, Saint Petersburg–based Sergei Bugaev Afrika's concurrent installation at I-20 seemed discomfitingly real, incorporating into a sculptural installation a video made by Al Qaeda–backed Chechen rebels of an attack on Russian soldiers.

Perhaps most poignant in this context was Eddo Stern's *Sheik Attack*, 2000. A former Israeli soldier, Stern spliced together selections from the video games Settlers III, SimCity, Nuclear Strike, and Red Alert to compose a "fictional documentary" about the creation, scuttled idealism, and increasing militarism of his homeland. The projected sequence of short vignettes, linked by graphics that make each scene clear as a historical phase (or a different "level" in a game), provides visual metaphors for real events. In opening scenes, for instance, construction workers erect a single building in an empty landscape, representing the nation's folk origins; later, a seemingly boundless cityscape signifies a burgeoning Tel Aviv. Yet nothing is now so intuitively correct about the piece as its episodes circling violence. One gorgeous scene depicts a single assault helicopter lifting off the desert floor before drifting behind a dune; Stern incorporates cinematic dissolves to underscore the poetry of the machine's turning blades. In the final moments we're presented with cold-blooded shootings in a domestic habitat. Nearly all these scenes are accompanied by nostalgic Israeli songs, whose slow, languorous phrasings create the kind of paradoxical, aestheticized violence familiar from John Woo films.

The artist's intoxicating use of gaming and, in turn, the druglike warmth with which these corrosive images meet the eye is deft but not totally new. Describing the crowd in his poem "At the Ball Game," William Carlos Williams wrote of the same blissful "spirit of uselessness" surrounding a pastime: "So in detail they . . . / are beautiful . . . / It is alive, venomous / . . . It is the Inquisition, the / Revolution / It is beauty itself / that lives / day by day in them." Stern's images of games, usually experienced in isolation, are appropriate to an era more concerned with terror cells than with the fascism of Williams's day. And the automaton rhythms of the animated figures is in tune with contemporary religious fervor—the conviction that events unfold according to a grand plan, with all the world a kind of code in which we are merely players. This elliptical realism was underscored in a second gallery by a selection of handmade Afghani war rugs purchased or borrowed by Stern, each one depicting a scene in which indigenous people resisted Soviet aggressors during the war in the '80s. The stitched images provide a kind of analog pixelation, making Stern's work in media seem by comparison intimately linked to the world, not divorced from it like those spectacles Žižek envisions and derides.

—*Tim Griffin*