

Press release

October 15th
November 12th, 2022

Opening
Saturday, October 15th
from 11am to 8pm

Nine Lives Oli Epp

What are we talking about, generally, when we refer to “the aesthetics of the digital”? Social media, of course—especially Instagram, that deep trough of contemporary visual culture—but also e-commerce, porn, photo manipulation and graphics programmes, video games, CGI and, to a lesser extent, virtual reality and augmented reality.

What binds these disparate things together, if not the attainment (or, rather, the illusion of attainment) of our various atavistic desires? They satisfy our appetites and libidos, our desire not only to see but to possess, to interact with and to reproduce objects or images hitherto beyond our reach. Digital aesthetics are the aesthetics of thirst and consumption.

The London-based painter Oli Epp has described his work as “post-digital Pop,” a term that acknowledges his debt to artists of the 1950s and ’60s who appropriated popular culture. The term also suggests however, with that qualifying “post-”, a critical stance on the typical dynamics of contemporary digital media. Epp draws deeply from imagery sourced online, replicating the vivid, plastic luminosity of graphics and photography already highly keyed to appeal to the idly scrolling viewer. Like good advertisements, his pictures stop us in our tracks, which is what they are designed to do. Unlike most ads, however, they are usually somehow troubling, or corrupted. They are both stunningly gorgeous and grotesque; perfect and flawed; appealing and repulsive.

For his exhibition *Nine Lives*, Epp brings together nine new works of cats, animals he has depicted in the past (and perennial subjects of viral videos). His title acknowledges, of course, the myth that cats live multiple lives (successive, presumably, not simultaneous)—a legend probably born from cats’ ability to land safely even after flying or falling from considerable heights.

Epp’s paintings always land, too, despite the contortions he puts them through. In one painting, titled *Three Wishes*, a furious-looking black cat appears threaded inside a byzantine rope scratching post, looping and arcing like a sculpture by Noguchi or Calder. In *Argos*, a wizened black cat (the same cat, presumably, in a different life) has its face bejewelled with red, amber and green eyes, like some malfunctioning feline traffic light. In yet another painting, titled *Castrator*, a viciously snarling cat lifts his leg and transforms himself into a giant Swiss army knife, as if contemplating the removal of his own pink and horribly humanoid testicles.

Throughout Epp’s work, we witness a deliberate categorical confusion between the human, the animal, and the inanimate. Objects morph into figures, and figures become objects. Animals represent people, and people behave like animals. Epp often describes his paintings in terms of hybridity, as if he is breeding rare new species of quasi-organic beings, or grafting ears onto the backs of mice. He told me excitedly of an Australian songbird called the superb lyrebird that has been documented imitating human sounds such as car alarms, chainsaws and SLR camera shutters.

But Epp’s scrambling of pre-existing forms and categories is about more than just remixing for Surrealism’s sake. It touches on something at the very core

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of artmaking, as it has existed for millennia. To imbue an inanimate, handmade object with the power and agency of a living being (or even a supernatural being) is to grant life to dead matter. Artists' reasons for doing this have, historically, been wildly various, from self-protection to deity worship to virtuosic showmanship to unvarnished commerce. Liveliness can be conjured through mimesis, but it comes in other guises too, from the uncanny to the totemic or the vividly expressionistic. Epp, at various times, has deployed all these strategies in his paintings, especially photorealist illusionism.

Epp admits to a tortured relationship with his precisely honed paintings. Across the arc of his still short career, one gets the sense of him striving towards a level of perfection that is promised, though never truly delivered, by digital culture. Perhaps it can't be delivered by painting, either, though if one considers the differences between these media, between the seductive though ultimately disappointing quality of the pixelated, backlit and ephemeral screen image and the unruly, messy but ultimately pure materiality of paint, it seems that a painting has a formal integrity—and an enduring sense of aliveness—that a digital image does not. Epp's art satisfies in a way that his manifold sources never can.

Jonathan Griffin