

**Known
Planes
of Existence**

**Brody
Condon**



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**Let's say
I've just
erased the
world
and not
destroyed
mine.**

Sinking Into the Floor

Brandon Stosuy

Brody Condon affixes his own factual and revised history to games, creating a different, personalized sort of digital authoring. Rewriting and defamiliarizing clichéd gaming tropes, he's more interested in autobiographical overlaps, the subsequent subversion of the impulse, and other forms of infestation than straight, out-of-the-box play. Condon's artistic universe centers on movements (using literal game pieces) and the dialogue between Late Medieval radical Protestants, 60's and 70's counterculture, contemporary/mid-century Fascism, and current pop culture, while folding in roll (and role) playing, outsider Fantasy Art, astral projection, and 80's drug culture. It's more about the spaces he colonizes than playing the games; the potential violence and the aftermath of trauma rather than the actual event. Condon's symbolically and visually rich virtual locales offer an alternate environment, a place where endless repetition (of death, spastic dancing, or the most banal half memory) is easily attainable.

Considering Condon's fascination with out-of-body experience, what he terms "moments of trauma and transcendence in stasis," and games relying on die rolls to move a character and cast spells, it's productive to consider the poet Wallace Stevens. The corraling may seem arbitrary – a random cast of the dice – but both Condon and Stevens use their work as a guide for comprehending the "projection of the self" into the unreal. Moreover, in Stevens' worldview it's imagination that physically shapes reality: As participants in some shared everyday, we revise endlessly to keep up with the ever-changing (self-revising) world. Think of it as a massive multiplayer role-playing game.

The notion also overlaps with Karma Physics, a programming/computer term describing a type of procedural animation that applies real-world physics to video games. It's often used as a replacement for traditional static death animations – movements are calculated on the fly, making the character's interaction with the space around it more lifelike. As with Stevens' take on imagination, the "reality" of the game isn't predetermined; we mold or mar it according to how we respond to/comprehend it with our imagination. It's historical modification via creative anachronism, faulty perspective, memory and trauma.

In 2006 Condon took a trip to Virginia to interview Skip Atwater, the technical director of the Monroe Institute. The organization, founded by Robert Monroe, is known for its work with, as Condon describes it, "audio sound patterns that can have dramatic effects on states of consciousness." The repetitious sounds echo the low-bit sonic repetition in early game soundtracks. Fittingly, when you play a video game, you project yourself, leave your body, and enter a new space ripe with new traumas, hallucinations. You merge with objects, realities overlap, past memories resurface, and are revisited. These very recreations of traumatic events, filtered through modified or appropriated pop cultural objects, form the base of Condon's work. As he explains, "Participatory subcultural strategies like the modification of existing commercial products are logical extensions of appropriation and pop art. A kind of 'creative consumption' seems to be one of the most



Texas Instruments
TI-99 Home Computer, 1984.



Gymkata, 1985.
MGM

relevant, but horrible, ways to function as a contemporary artist in the culture of late capitalism.”

The artist grew up between Florida and the rural Midwest. His father, a veteran of the Vietnam War heavily into the easy money of 80’s narcotics trafficking, was attracted to “country outlaws” like Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, and Willie Nelson. His mother and stepfather, initially involved in cooperative living experiments and local activism, were eventually caught up in the drug-addled aftermath of a misunderstood, disorganized 60’s countercultural ideology. “My parents weren’t victims of any questionable agenda,” Condon says. “The eventual breakdown was due to a lack of self-discipline, an attraction to fashionable rebellion, and layers of separation from, as well as a misunderstanding of, the intellectual source of the movements.”

Of course, it’s normal for children to work out trauma in play. As a young teenager Condon programmed a “hyper violent text-based adventure game based on the 1985 B-movie ‘Gymkata’ with a hand-me-down TI-99 computer.” In “Gymkata,” An Olympic Gold Medalist/CIA operative travels to a fictional Eurasian country to assist the US in installing a nuclear base. He immediately lands and battles giants, Ninjas, and villager zombies while perched and swinging on gym horses and horizontal bars conveniently placed throughout the landscape. “It was the first and best digital piece I ever made,” he says. “As a player you could only move north, south, east or west, and were immediately and brutally killed. I programmed it sitting on the floor in a closet in front an old TV.”

Condon recalls a moment years before his “Gymkata” project when his mother was high, entered the room, and smashed his Atari yelling, “My children don’t love me!” Condon told me, in retrospect, the incident didn’t bother him, but that it was noteworthy because it was the first time he can recall psychological violence intertwining in such a direct way with his play.

As an adult, Condon began sifting the video games and B-movies from his earlier years through art history by creating performative installations, recreating abstracted traumatic spaces from memory by performing repetitive motions (“hanging from guts inside wooden contraptions” in dry desert lake beds outside Los Angeles) for hours. No more than a few visitors attended the performances. Condon draws a connection between his work and the work of Ann Hamilton. He sees Hamilton’s use of the body “as a kind of kinetic sculpture enacting a repetitive motion that changed slightly with each variation (burning the lines out of a book, wringing hands in oil, etc.) all within sculptural installation environments.” He also relates his work to 60’s/70’s performance artists like Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, and Marina Abramovic, who often enacted or allowed a ritualized, performative form of violence on themselves.

“I was focusing on a specific idea learned from the trauma industry (counseling) at the time and forming a piece around it,” Condon said, joking that his performances were the “post-traumatic stress” version of the earlier actions. “They



Untitled War, 2004
Brody Condon

generally included a repetitive motion in a sculptural installation that was essentially an abstracted version of a space from a traumatic memory. I was involved with EMDR therapy at the time – a type of near hypnosis where you revisit certain memories. You are projected into those traumatic moments again – you go into shock, etc. So I was acutely aware on an experiential level of how memories were fabricated and reformed via desire later in life, and how this constantly destabilizes your own history. Re-creating those spaces and inhabiting them while enacting a ritual motion was a way to take control possibly, but, of course, that was just a starting point. From there I was able to inject those experiential spaces with borrowed pop-cultural fantasies.”

Applying repetition to idling gaming characters, and working violence into his art practice, Condon shifted his work deeply into the virtual realm. In 1999, he and a friend found themselves laughing and joking about the victims of the Columbine disaster. Surprised by his startling lack of empathy, the artist was led to create a grid of multiple figures of a friend (Adam) in a video game, killing him repeatedly as an attempt to personalize the experience, “mapping elements” of his “lived experience” into the game space. He told me he decided to undertake the project because, “[he] felt overwhelmed with [his] own questionable ability to separate images from their original context and meaning.” Beyond this personal reaction and self-implication, it nods to performance history, albeit on a television monitor. As he states, “Adam Killer is, in a sense, obviously inspired by Burden’s Shoot. In this case, however, I am the person with the gun.”

Soon after Adam Killer, Condon created custom avatars and performed repetitive worshipping for weeks in a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) that included thousands of players. During the normal goings-on of the game, Condon turned a character to face outside the screen where it could constantly worship him, the player and artist. Condon sat in front of the character for hours, making the projected avatar worship him for hours – a weird (and deeply humorous, trenchant) feedback loop. This virtual worship solidified Condon’s notion of “exchanging [his] body for the game character’s body.” According to the artist, “I could make [a game character] perform whatever I wanted, forever,” adding “the basic structure of the Hamilton performances and the repetitive endurance elements of the other work made its way, via my early performative work, into the games.”

More technically difficult collaborations like Waco Resurrection, an interactive simulation of the events from 1993 at the Branch Davidian compound where players embodied a magic spell and AK-47-wielding David Koresh, “created a specific socio-politically charged historical moment in the game space.” It’s also part of the name, and quite literally the driving force, behind DeResFX.Kill (KarmaPhysics < Elvis), a self-playing modification of the computer game Unreal, created by Condon in 2004. In it, endless multiples of Elvis fall and crumble against a pink background. “The representations of the Elvis and Ram Dass are appropriated archetypes that represent a certain type of character or ideology, but they generally function as empty shells to inhabit while killing your friends,” he says.



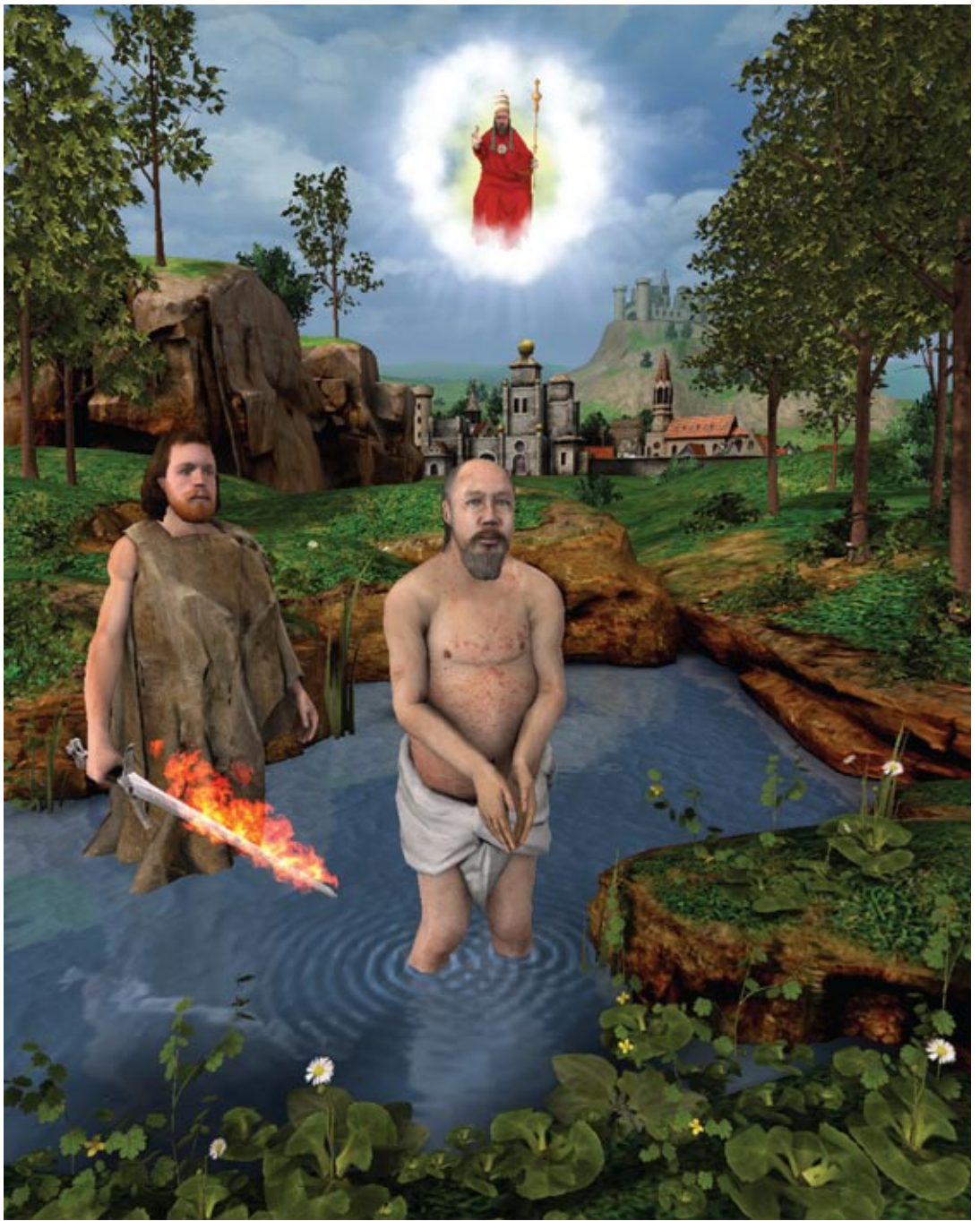
ABOVE
resurrection.jpg
(After Grunewald), 2006
Brody Condon



ABOVE
trepanationlizard.jpg, 2007
Brody Condon



ABOVE
thedamned.jpg, 2006
Brody Condon





LEFT
DefaultProperties();, 2006
Brody Condon

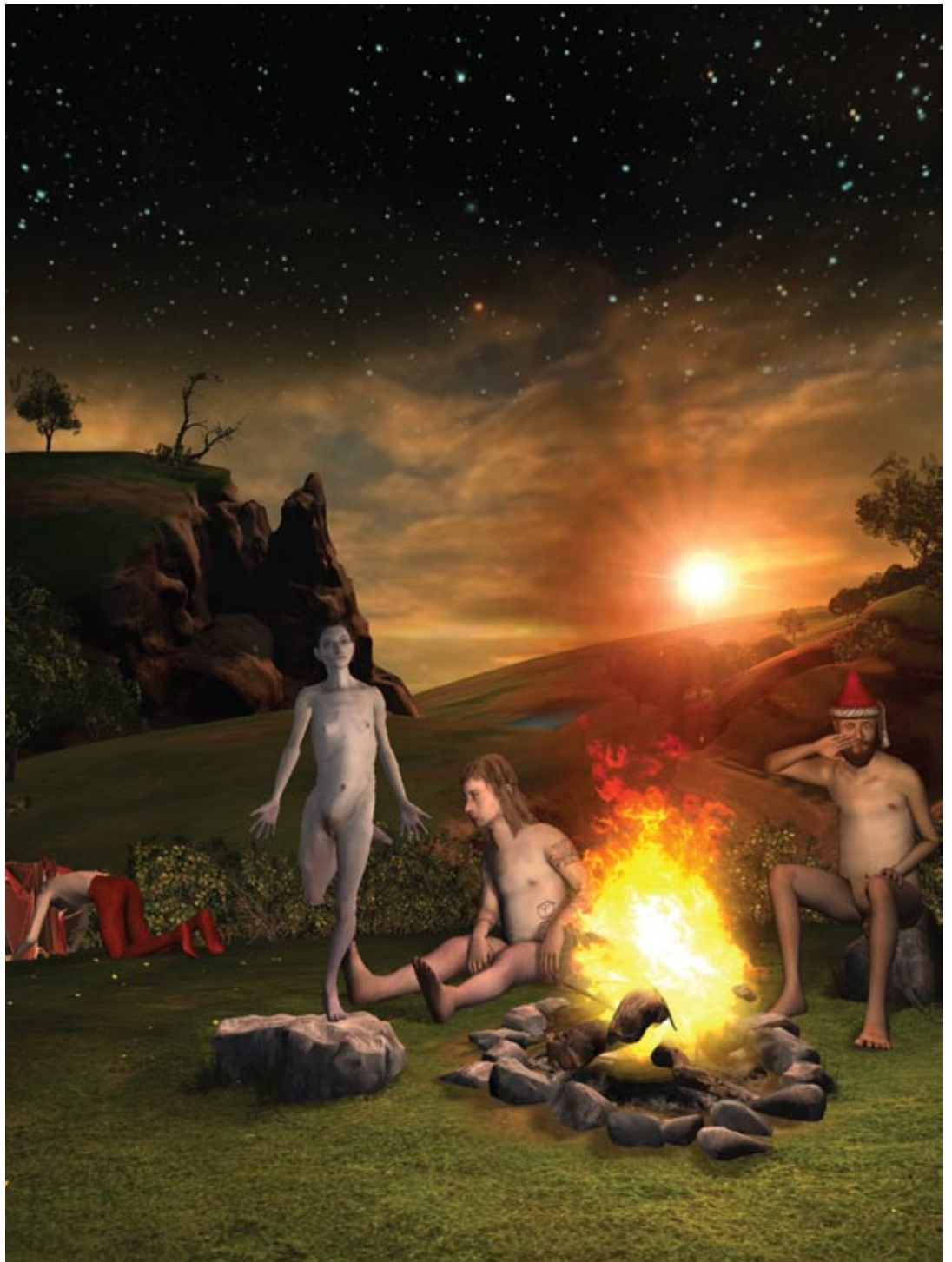
ABOVE
DefaultProperties();, 2006
Installation view
Museum het Domein

BELOW
The Baptism of Christ, c.1505
Gerard David
Groeningemuseum, Bruges



LEFT
Resurrection, 1450-60
Dieric Bouts the Elder
Norton Simon Museum of Art, Pasadena

RIGHT
resurrection (after bouts), 2007
Brody Condon









PREVIOUS
Judgment Modification
(After Memling), 2008
Brody Condon

ABOVE
Judgment Modification
(After Memling), 2008
Installation view
Santa Monica Museum
Brody Condon



RIGHT
The Last Judgement, 1467-71
Hans Memling
National Museum in Gdansk,
Poland



“We project ourselves into portraiture here. The real content is the Karma Physics code that drives the dancing/death motion.” Condon misuses karma physics as “a new representation of death via code, not just the visual surface of trauma, but the physical dynamics of the falling figure.” Giving that falling body the specific likenesses of well-known figures can’t help but represent a specific ideology. In *Suicide Solution*, a continuation of the repetitive motion performances, as well as a meditation on trauma, suicide, and new representations of death, Condon’s avatars “performed suicides” in more than 50 video games.

In Condon’s most recent work, he has replaced the well-known historical and religious figures and environments in three paintings by late 15th century Flemish masters with his own elements. The new characters, based on models as well as the original paintings, are not intended to be specific likenesses of individuals, so the connection is different than his relationship to *Adam Killer*. “I’m ‘modding’ the paintings like I modify the games,” he explains. “The biographies of the individual painters are less important than the overall cultural trends of which they were a reflection.”

Condon knows these trends intricately. He’s interested in, as he puts it, “apocalyptic thinking as the stimulus for modern thinking, as well the foundation of the States.” He suggests that, the use of “late-Medieval Radical Protestantism as a progressive tool for social and political reform – which is now being used for conservative purposes – connects Late-Medieval Radical Protestantism and the ‘Siege of Münster’ in the early 1500s to ‘Waco-type events’ of our present day.” Condon is well read in various histories of early Christianity as well as later radical Protestant movements, heretical mystical Christian, pagan, and theosophical practices. He’s steeped himself in hallucinogenic texts, “tripped out” fiction, and in his words “a healthy dose of conspiracy theory.” When we first met, he mentioned *Chariots of the Gods*, a book by Erich von Daniken that gives a close reading of the Bible based on the sections the author believes relate to extraterrestrial intervention. In Condon’s new works, the artist, like von Daniken, freely interprets the religious imagery, removing the associated storylines to its characters, creating an alternative narrative through his own alien intervention of zombies, monsters, ravers, nudists, and his personal cosmology.

In *Children Of The Sun: A Pictorial Anthology From Germany To California, 1883-1994*, a book he has mentioned on numerous occasions, the roots of hippie/New Age culture are seductively intertwined with Germanic pre-fascist political history and ideologies. The basic idea is that from 1895 and onward, the mostly middle-class German members of “Wandervogel” – described by the authors as “part hobo and part Medieval” – went on nature walks, skinny dipped, established rural “anti-homes,” and “sang their own versions of Goliardic songs and camped under primitive conditions.” (Later hippie festivals are then linked to pagan festivals of Middle Ages: It’s not difficult to then extend this to outdoor European metal festivals and various rural raves.) In the book the German term “Lebensreform” that came into use in late 19th century is translated as “Life Reform”/“Back To Nature” and is said to include German “social trends,”

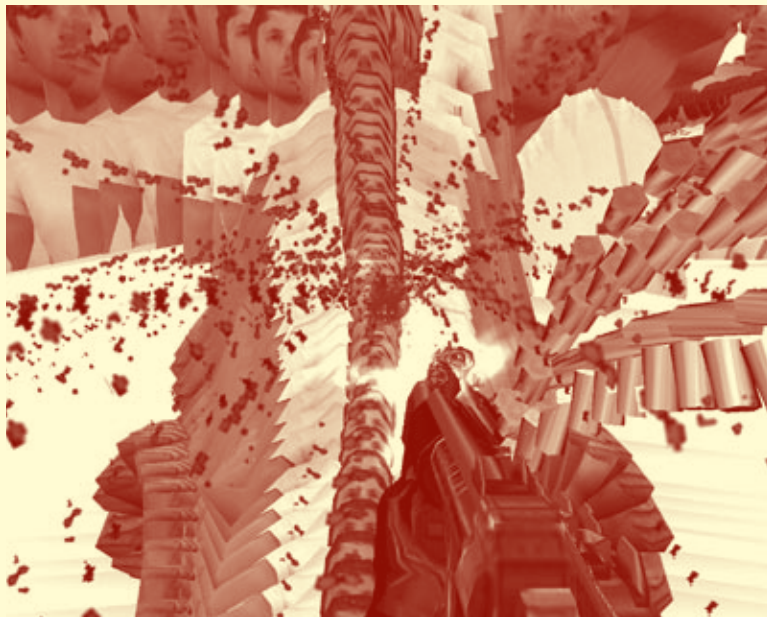


Nature Boy, Maximilian SIKINGER, in the Santa Monica Mountains, 1946. From “Classical Nutrition”.



Germany, 1925. Celebrants at the Hermannsdenkmal.

Adam Killer, 1999-2001
Brody Condon



Worship, 2001
Brody Condon



Waco Resurrection, 2003
A C-level project



DeRez FX.Kill < Elvis;, 2004
Brody Condon





Death Animations, 2006
Brody Condon



Tony Sinking into the Floor,
Face Up and Face Down, 1973
Bruce Naumann
Electronic Arts Intermix,
New York

including vegetarianism, nudism, natural medicine, nude sun worship (Solarism), garden towns, health food, naturopathy, communitarianism, and liberation for women, children, and animals. These pre-hippy counterculture beliefs, it's explained, came to America firsthand when certain key German teachers, thinkers, and authors immigrated to California. The Californians, adopting the "natur-mensch" (child of nature) philosophies were called "Nature Boys." Their aim for aesthetic/biological purity is then easily linked to utopianism and, later, biological research. [Quotations from *Children of the Sun: A Pictorial Anthology From Germany to California, 1883-1949* by Edited by Gordon Kennedy, Nivaria Press 1998].

Folklore and fantasy are obviously part of early Anglo Saxon history. Condon is fascinated with the way in which pre-Fascist ideology and the "sketchy" use of northern European folklore, theosophy, and conspiracy theory relate to contemporary American Politics. As he puts it, "One-world government and rapture-seeking Christian fundamentalists (as well as the current Pope) know this well, and speak of theosophy and fascism in the same sentence." He's explained in conversation that he believes fantasy art and culture can be tied to Fascism and over-determined interpretations of Nietzsche by John Millius and the Conan films, as well as the power narratives of Fantasy artist Frank Frazetta.

His research into the genealogy of counter-cultural/new age history, which linked to his parents' lifestyle occurred simultaneously with his encounters with Flemish primitive painting, but the connections weren't immediate. "It was years after I my first experience with Flemish primitive painting, when I was living in the Netherlands, that I began the historical research necessary to come to a basic understanding of the cultural context of those works, and was able to make connections to the themes present in my previous work." The imagery of the early Flemish paintings reminded him of video games, but as characters now stuck in some kind of repetitive stasis somewhere between trauma and transcendence.

I've spent hours with Condon's images and the source images behind them: Battlefields packed with armored warriors, variously shaped and sized dragons, cartoon woman with oversized breasts and wings, a lone knight on a surrealist horse, mushroom cities, bodies suspended in space, crystal balls, and airbrushed desert landscapes. When we met recently in a bar in Brooklyn, he brought along his computer with huge glowing alien on the top and showed me images from his collection of fantasy art. "The original paintings relate to each other in obvious ways," he says. "But my immediate relationship with the images (Bouts' Resurrection and Memling's Judgment) had to do with a D&D/Medieval fantasy fetish mixed with an interest in hallucinogenic experience: 'How does a magical, intelligent +5 Vorpal Bastard Sword of chaotic evil alignment with psionic powers react to being dipped in a cauldron of LSD?' At the same time, the composition of some works, especially *The Baptism* by Gerard David reminded me visually of current 3-D computer games. Or, as with *Memling's Judgment* – shoeless, robed and bearded hippies, floating on clouds, flying out of golden, extra-dimensional portals above an alien with a massive magical sword weighing hundreds of pre-

pubescent-bodied zombies, as they crawl out the of the ground towards either the animal headed cannibals that live in the volcano on the right, or the Medieval nudist colony on the left? WTF?”

His recreations, this creative non-anachronism, manage to remain true to the originals’ spirit: Resurrection (After Bouts) traces the color pallet of the figures, but not their exact location in the original painting (no need for a mirror). The dominant portion of Condon’s modification is the night sky, with its sun constantly setting/rising like a jump-cut continuation of the campfire (Jesus, ... or as Condon would describe him, “the robed hippie” holding up his hand). The angel becomes a “zombie lady” doing yoga on a rock. There is a freaked-out soldier in the back with a slowly animated, hard-edged abstraction for a head, a rocker with Satanist tattoos (Belial, etc), and some guy with large testicles and a funny hat. Is it a Midwestern Christian camping retreat or a shamanistic party in Sedona desert? Or, for example, as Condon describes The Last Judgment (Memling): “The heaven side cathedral is a fractured knockoff of the Crystal Cathedral, a mega-church in the O.C., watched over at the steps by a giant neo-pagan. No one seems to want to go there, though. The middle part includes zombies rising from the ground, only to find themselves at a spring break/beach/rave scene dominated by a huge, extra-dimensional portal, puking Kandinsky-style mystical abstraction, while a giant woman with magical, golden plate mail and with large tail feathers is doing a peacock mating dance...”

Through this rigorous research and reworking, Condon strips/rips cultural as-sociations from the paintings asking: “How does one function consciously and responsibly with historical images, while utilizing the processes of our generation (i.e. the illustration work we just looked at, totally ripping the components of images from their original context and meaning)?” He begins by assigning the imagery a new life. From the get go, before he even begins creating his own pieces, he views the images away from their context/environment (e.g. terming Christ a “bearded hippie”), which allows for modification rather than appropriation, nods to his escape into the material as a child, and expands the lives of the original works beyond their clichéd/reined-in cultural associations. Condon then places his own past under a microscope, modifying it as he sees fit, linking it to the Flemish originals and his own present. Fittingly, he views the projections as “performative installations,” the characters idling on the smallest (or largest) tasks to infinity. Clearly they’re the culmination of a timeline – a new series of spaces where earlier and current concerns overlap, creating a congregation of virtual icons and personal tapestries, infusing some sort of sad, funny, poignant, and lived soul into the machine.



Adrian Smith
Games Workshop Ltd 2003 ©

