# IN REAL LIFE Tom van der Meulen

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## **In Real Life**

Artcore invited artists to apply to In Real Life (IRL) a two month residency that asks the question of how the digitisation of the world is affecting knowledge, communication and relationships today. In an increasingly online sphere artists have considered how social media has radically changed our experience of the real. The residency aimed to question what does 'real' mean today? To critically explore how the curation of our online selves shape and redefine and transform the way we interact with people and our environment, artists were invited to investigate two central questions:

-To what extent digital art space democratise, educate and socialize the way in which our identity is consumed?

-How does digitisation democratise and affect artists identity by making art pieces accessible without time, money or location barriers?

The catalogue collects two months research and production outcomes as a form of documentation and visual experiments to interrogate the notion of over exposure and censorship as well as how social media and digitisation affects our reflection on the world and influences our perceived models of connections.

As a result of two-months residency at Artcore the show features new works by the artists in residence: Tom Van der Meulen and Maria Cepeda. The works on display make use of new technologies, such as photospheric cameras and Virtual Reality headsets, and touch on themes of body image, social media addiction and online gaming.

In Real Life examines the digital world as both an outsider and a participant, and focusses on distinctions between the real and the virtual. The exhibition seeks to open a dialogue on the uses of digital technologies, our growing addictions to mobiles phones and other devices, and the ways we present ourselves online.

Maria Cepeda, a Fine Art student at Leeds University, works in a wide variety of mediums including ceramics, paint, photography, video and digital art. Her work is interactive and often includes wearable art and participatory elements. During the In Real Life residency, Maria created wearable artworks that replicate the different costumes and armours adorned by avatars in online role playing games. These wearable pieces are displayed alongside a Virtual Reality installation that can be experienced by audiences through a VR headset.

As audiences interact with Cepeda's VR installation, the digital motion of the headset may lag behind the wearers movements. For Cepeda, these glitches reveal differences between the virtual and the real world; differences that may start to fade as VR technology improves. Her work explores the conflicts that arise from these blurred lines between the real and the digital world. These glitches also mean that each viewer will experience her artwork in a different way, giving them autonomy over how they interact in a digital environment. How we present ourselves online is a key concern for Cepeda, she believes our use of digital technology alters how we perceive our bodies and the bodies of others.

Through creating avatars and modified versions of ourselves on social media platforms and role playing games, the imagined images associated with our identities and appearances become distorted and warped.

Tom Van der Meulen, a recent Fine Art graduate from the University of Reading, creates paintings inspired by digital glyphs and images. His works appears as windows to a surreal, digital landscape and often extend beyond the canvases they occupy. Van der Meulen's work is concerned by the aesthetic validity of flatness following the advent of digital reproduction; images of artworks are now shared so widely that many people become familiar with pieces of art without ever seeing the physical works. The imagery used in Van der Meulen's work presents a conflict between the benefits of digital technologies, and the issues that arise because of them. He acknowledges that digital devices have revolutionised the way we experienced art and visual imagery, and draws inspiration from the graphic elements that we see every day. Van der Meulen reimagines these digital designs as painted forms making use of acrylic paints and household gloss, adding a reflective element that cannot be replicated digitally.

## **Contribution by Frank Abbott**

Both Maria Cepeda and Tom Van Der Meulen have, over the last two months , developed a new body of work for this exhibition. It has given them the opportunity to extend their work, particularly in relation to the theme of In Real Life. This exhibition is both a development of each artists individual work and an opportunity to reflect on the impact of the emergence of a shared virtual realm, operating in ways which we are only beginning to understand.

Maria Cepeda reflects on what it is to be entangled with physical and online worlds. In her sculptural practice she explores the augmentation of the body with ceramic enhancements. Atmospheric photographs of her character figures point towards the further elaboration of identity which emerges from online interaction. The worlds of gaming and virtual presence are evoked through the creation of a 'glitched' imperfect doubling of the territory entered through the virtual reality viewer. Moving between different media, this exhibition creates a series of dialogues across the physical and the digital divide, exploring the duality in virtual reality.

Tom Van Der Meulen's paintings embody on their surface our entrancement with the screen and all its trivial inducements. The tricks and tropes of the graphic games which play before us on websites, adverts, streaming servers and self published channels are brought back to canvas. Laid out in the cold light of day they coalesce into logos, graphic simplifications and floating compositions, carrying their content as their attractiveness. Or, should we say 'attraction', as, like dubious insects, we hover around the slightly toxic flower of digital dopamine. Everything is on the level in these paintings, serviceable as a background, as a logo, a like, or a sale.

**Frank Abbott** is an artist whose work has developed over the last 40 years in relation to the emergence of new media forms. Initially working as a filmmaker and performing with new music group The Scratch Orchestra he created experimental work for television in the early days of UK Channel 4. He has subsequently combined media production with performance in work shown internationally whilst teaching Fine Art at Nottingham Trent University. Recently retired from teaching he has concentrated on a range of long term works with other artists which explore the nature of dialogue and collaboration. He is part of the team which runs Nottingham based Film Free and Easy and a member of the Board of Primary Nottingham, where he is based.

### How the consumer is digitally consumed by Tom van der Meulen

I believe we are living in a digital screen centric time period, screens are part of everyday life and are unavoidable. Digital culture has made seeing art more accessible by transforming the way we can find and look at art. The digital world has brought about a greater diversity to the art world, we can access a range of material from a fully comprehensive timeline. In my own work I represent digital spaces and imagery through the medium of contemporary painting. This type of contemporary art can be described as 'A-temporal'; painting that has entered an unrestricted arena where all forms and periods of art can coexist at once taking influence from a range of sources. Digital screens do, however, encourage quick passive consumption, because of their uniformity with the current commodity culture, of 'fast and now'. There is an endless supply of images on social media. We keep scrolling, looking for our next 'quick fix'. We are led to fantasize about what is perceived as 'perfect' on social media and our view on what is real is distorted, giving us a 'fake' experience.

The digital art world can deprive the viewer of an objective authentic experience. What is considered important or great art, on social media, is governed by artificial algorithms. We tend to 'play up' to these algorithms, becoming obsessed with gaining recognition from something that is not 'real'. Physical galleries and art spaces are still as important and relevant as ever. They are physical spaces where anything and everything is questioned, a safe space for open objective conversations about the world around us. Art galleries and works of art are devices through which you can experience the digital world in 'real' life. My project for the In Real Life residency breaks down the subjective wall surrounding the digital world, through the frame of contemporary painting. This in turn, enables us to critique and better understand the digital world. In this residency I have created large digitally influenced paintings that explore the transcendental digital landscape; Creating windows that delve deep below the surface of the digital world. Landscapes that place us, the viewer, within a tangible space in the digital world, through the medium of contemporary art, thus helping us to better understand digital technology.

### Conversation with Tom van der Meulen



Tom van der Meulen, Elide, Household Gloss on canvas, 100x100cm, 2018

#### Where are you based?

In Swindon, Wiltshire.

#### How would you like to use this residency to develop your current research and how do you think the time spent at Artcore can benefit your process of doing?

I am using this residency to give my undivided attention to my own practice for two months. This residency gives me a specific goal to work towards. It also gives me a great opportunity to showcase my work and develop as an artist.

In the proposal you mentioned you would like to break down the subjective wall surrounding the digital world, through the frame of contemporary painting. Doing this you aim to explore how we operate with digital technology, sharing a very intimate and obsessive relationship with it. Why are you interested in it and how do you aim to connect it with your current practice? The digital world is unavoidable today. It influences all our lives, it is often seen as a positive and progressive modern tool. This is something I partly believe. I think there is a great deal to critique within the digital sphere. I'm really interested in objectively looking at it within my art. We have this intimate and obsessive relationship with it but we appear to take it at its face value. I connect the digital to my art by composing my paintings on my laptop, using a combination of digital imagery within Adobe Suite programmes, which I then paint.

# How and when have you decided to use the medium of painting to investigate the effect technologic platforms and repetitive process have on imagery, both elements that lead to quick passive consumption?

After composing my digital imagery on my laptop I find that the best way to start an objective conversation about the digital world is by transferring it into the critical frame of contemporary painting. The merging of the two opposing mediums encourages us to look at it in a new way, helping us to think objectively about it.



Tom van der Meulen, Numinous, Household Gloss on canvas, 100x100cm, 2018

# What is the most interesting or inspiring thing you have seen or been to recently, and why?

I went travelling around Asia last summer and saw so many amazing things. It really opened my eyes and broadened my perspective. I saw lots of really interesting architecture, painting and sculpture, all of which gave me new ideas for my own practice.

#### What keeps you curious?

Wanting to constantly develop my art by questioning the world around us. I really enjoy creating new works of art that explore and critique different subjects. I strive to create new things that people will enjoy and actively engage with. With art everyone has their own interpretation and I love that there are no boundaries.

#### Which other artists' work do you admire, and why?

I really admire Laura Owens work. She is another artists that uses the medium of paint to look at the digital world. I love how she paints common marks you would find on digital programs such as Photoshop. Her work creates a playful language between the two.





# What do you think is the role of artists who decided to work on the issues related to digital identity in the current society?

I think the role of artists dealing with this subject is to encourage us to think about it openly and help us better understand our relationship with technology. Being curious about everything ensures that we continue to learn.

#### What are your thoughts on being an artist in Derby for two months?

I'm excited about this, its a new adventure, which not only gives me a chance to explore a new place and interact with new people, but allows me to do the same with my art.

# How do you see Artcore, as an art institution, to support you at this stage of your career?

Arcore is giving me a fantastic platform to showcase my art. I think this experience will really help me to better myself as an artist in and outside of my practice. It's great that there are organisations such Arcore out there that are willing to work with artists and help them develop. Arcore helps to bring the artist and the community together.

# HOW THE CONSUMER IS DIGITALLY CONSUMED by Tom van der Meulen



Tom van der Meulen, Untrue Truth, Household Gloss on Canvas, 100x100, 2018



Tom van der Meulen, Mundane Overdose, Household Gloss on Canvas, 100x100, 2018

Tom var der Meulen, Household Gloss on Canvas, 40 et old Closs on Canva , 100x100cm, 20.



























## **Artist biography**

My work explores the uses of painting in an increasingly digital screen centric time period. I use paint in a heterogeneous way that brings imagery found on electronic screens into the critical frame of contemporary painting. My work can be described as 'A-temporal'; painting that has entered an unrestricted arena where all forms and periods of art can coexist at once taking influence from a range of sources. My work shows the effect technologic platforms have on imagery; these platforms display images using a repetitive process that encourages quick passive consumption. Images tend to lose their distinctiveness and morph together. There is a tension within my work between digital and paint that highlights and critiques the qualities of both mediums. My work and its absence of specificity emphasizes that painting is not reactionary or separate from more modern ways of creating, but instead has an important beneficial relationship with them. A relationship that helps us understand technology and painting better.

#### Educaton

2006-2011 -	9 GCSE's A-C including Maths, English and Science
2013-2014 -	Pass in a Foundation Diploma Art & Design, Swindon College
2014-2017 -	First Class Honours in BA Fine Art, University of Reading

#### Awards

2017 - BA Art Owen Ridley Degree Show Prize for Outstanding Work (University of Reading)

Artcore is a contemporary arts space that celebrates the Derby, East midlands and beyond cultural richness and diversity. The venue presents an ever-changing programme of art exhibitions, creative activities for adults and young people, film screenings, artist residencies, talks, and festivals. With our statement "together we stand" we want to engage and connect with diverse range of communities in Derby. Our key objective is to use art as a tool to strengthen community cohesion and engage with a wide range of audience, educate, raise awareness and provide a space to build self-confidence and mutual trust and respect.

We engage with society's most disadvantaged and vulnerable people, by offering inspiring and motivating programmes in areas where there is a lack in provision and engagement with the arts is minimal. Our mission is to become a place where talent and creativity is nurtured and where art and culture are accessible to all. We aim to bring positivity and shine in people lives providing a platform to encourage dialogue between people of all ages, abilities, diverse cultural background through creative activities, skills sharing and development.

Artcore offers a contemporary gallery, workshop and artist studio promoting distinctive art and culture. Through a vibrant programme of events, exhibitions, residencies, art talks, screenings we provide a platform to showcase significant art locally, nationally and internationally by supporting early, mid-career artists and established artists. At Artcore, education in general is fundamental to the work we do. We develop and strengthen the education role in a non-formal education approach. Our main objective is to engage young in learning experiences to enhance their curiosity and interest on their art skills, developing their uniqueness and progression as individual, also through volunteering and work experience.

We believe art acts as a learning tool, breaking down barriers and contribute in the production of knowledge and dialogue as a vehicle of analysis and growth. Moreover we engage with our audience through creative, imaginative and meaningful activities, offering the individuals the opportunity to experiment with creativity, enhance learning and broaden career prospects.



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