

Ghosts of the Machine

Dancing to the beat of the metaverse.

by Meredyth Cole

July 11, 2022 5:00 PM



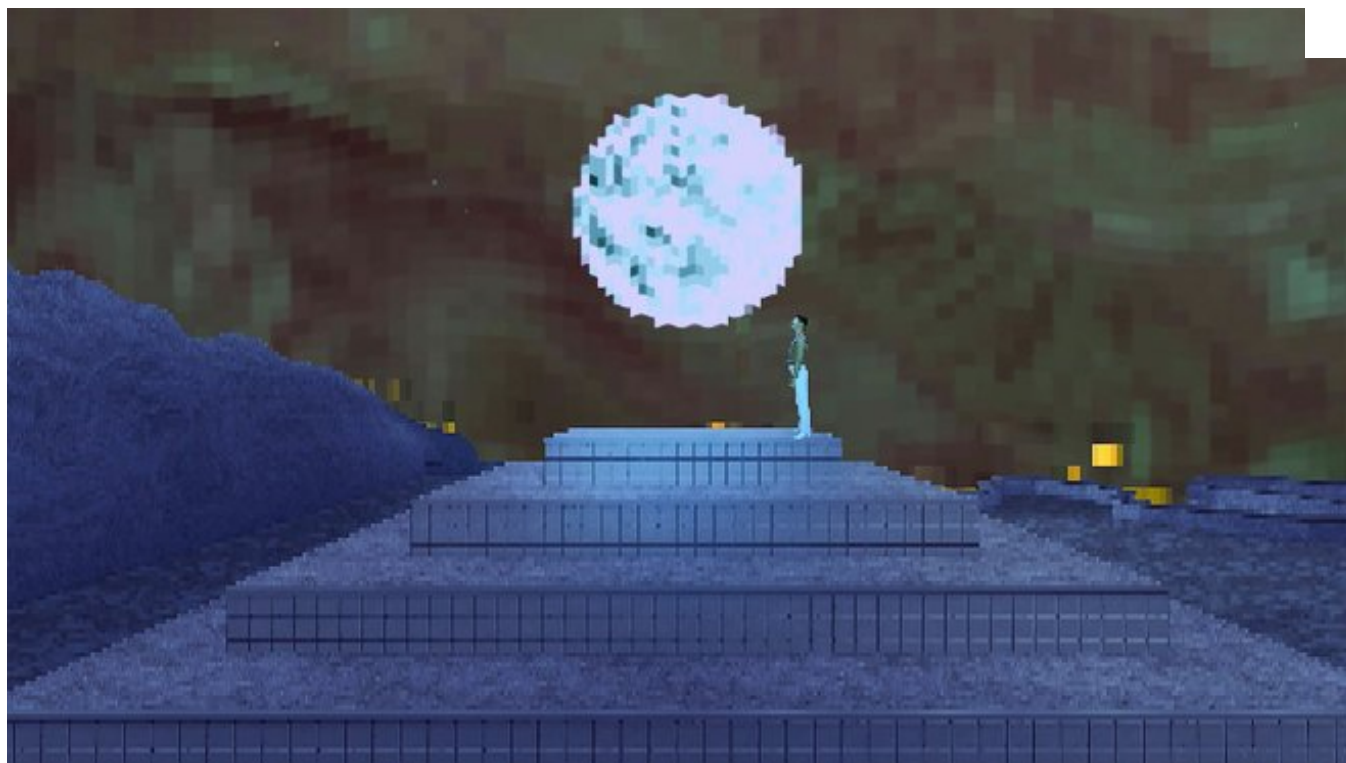
Lu Yang, "Doku: Digital Alaya," no date, aluminum, LED lights and backlit fabric, installation view at the Polygon Gallery, North Vancouver, 2022 (photo by Dennis Ha)

Much like they do on earth, people in the metaverse love to dance.

Ghosts of the Machine, an exhibition on view until Aug. 14 at the Polygon Gallery in North Vancouver, features work by seven international artists who explore the relationship between human beings and the digital worlds they inhabit – with a disproportionate number of dancing avatars.

In *Doku: Digital Alaya*, a video by the Chinese artist Lu Yang, the artist's non-binary avatar dances before backdrops of a slaughterhouse and a jungle, a burnt-out city and a spaceship. In *Retornar*, an avatar of Santiago Tamayo Soler, a Colombian artist based in Montreal, traverses a post-apocalyptic landscape in clubwear, only to

ascend to a purgatorial realm where human beings waiting for transcendence pass the time by dancing. Berlin-based artist Anne Duk Hee Jordan contributes underwater footage of sea creatures' courtship rituals – non-human mating dances.



Santiago Tamayo Soler, "Retornar," 2021, HD video, 20 min. (created as part of the PHI Montreal 2021 residency; courtesy the artist)

Dancing, it turns out, neatly encapsulates the show's themes. For *Doku: Digital Alaya*, the artist used motion-capture technology to animate the movements of the Doku avatar, resulting in digital dancing as jerky and stilted as that of many human beings. In *Retornar*, well-dressed avatars complain "these heels weren't made for the apocalypse." In both cases, the paradox of the metaverse (or any digital space) is clear – these so-called separate realms perpetuate the same issues that plague us here in three-dimensional reality. Be it awkward dancing or uncomfortable footwear, there is no escape.



Ho Tzu Nyen, "No Man II," 2017, single-channel projection on mirror, five-channel sound, 360 min., installation view at Polygon Gallery, North Vancouver, 2022 (courtesy of artist, Galerie Michael Janssen and Edouard Malingue Gallery; photo by Dennis Ha)

It's a depressing thought, and one that's reinforced by other pieces in the show. The purpose of an avatar is, supposedly, to be unburdened by the physical self. Skawennati, whose work welcomes viewers into the gallery, uses the medium of Second Life, a virtual world where humans mingle as avatars, to perform as a digital alter-ego named xox. Through the figure of xox, Skawennati, a Mohawk multimedia artist, has watched each iteration of her Second Life counterpart become increasingly realistic, prompting her to ask the question – is the avatar an idealized version of the artist, or is the artist, being so lifelike, the ideal version of an avatar?



Skawennati, "Birth of an Avatar (Homage to Mariko Mori)," 2017, machinimagraph, inkjet print, 70" x 45" (courtesy the artist)

In any case, the connection between the real and online self is more slippery and fluid than it appears at first glance. Juliana Huxtable, a name I was excited to see on the program, contributes a slightly underwhelming piece that nonetheless plays with the subversive potential of an online self. *ARI I* shows the American artist posing as a human animal hybrid with a luxurious serpent's tail. The work references the furry subculture and the phenomenon of "fursonas," animal-human hybrids who act as stand-ins for their human creators. The digital realm in which these fursonas play is, perhaps, where they can be most free and fully embodied. Again, a paradox.



T'uy't'tanat Cease Wyss, "Stl'alk'em Sts'ékts'ek / Magical Forest," 2022, mixed media installation with vinyl print, live plants and augmented reality markers, installation view at the Polygon Gallery, North Vancouver, 2022 (photo by Dennis Ha)

Digital realms are ethereal, free of consequence and untethered from reality – yet these spaces rely on human labour and resources mined here on earth. Each work in *Ghosts of the Machine* is chosen to remind us of this fact – the final work most of all. T'uy't'tanat Cease Wyss, a Skwxwu7mesh/Sto:Lo/Hawaiian/Swiss interdisciplinary artist based in Vancouver, contributes a small garden where planters line walls adorned with photorealistic forest wallpaper. The gallery's didactic text speaks of the natural world as “the most advanced technology we have,” but the garden can also be read as anti-technology, with its pungent aromas replacing the sterile, oddly spotless world of the avatars. It both is and isn't technology, in the way that the digital world both is and isn't real.

So, the show arrives where it began, with a blurry boundary and a gentle request: that we think about interconnection – online or in real life, the distinction doesn't matter. ■

***Ghosts of the Machine* at the Polygon Gallery in North Vancouver from June 3 to Aug. 14, 2022.
Featuring Ho Tzu Nyen, Juliana Huxtable, Anne Duk Hee Jordan, Lu Yang, Skawennati, Santiago Tamayo Soler and T'uy't'tanat-Cease Wyss.**


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Meredyth Cole's writing has appeared in Elle Canada, the Globe and Mail, Canadian Art, Hazlitt, Montecristo and others, most often with a focus on art, fashion and culture. Her practice also includes poetry and fiction. She lives in Vancouver.

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