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### Tony Oursler's fractured narratives

*Probing need and desire in Plexiglas houses*

By Simon Houpt

In the cramped basement of a converted Polish synagogue on Manhattan's Lower East Side, a trio of artist elves make the place feel like a surreal Santa's workshop. A jumble of half-finished sculptures clog the floor: over here, a game die the size of a head; over there, something that looks like an S&M snowman with a heavy chain snaking up and around his body. Tucked away in one corner, a thin and serious-looking bearded hipster is standing at a workbench, sanding a pocket-sized plank for a tiny model house. In the opposite corner, beyond heavy plastic curtains, a pair of clean-cut colleagues gone almost hypnotic with focus are editing video on oversized monitors, a dozen external hard drives and a half-consumed bottle of Advil Liqui-Gels between them.

"We like to do it all in the same place," says their good-humoured boss, the artist Tony Oursler, "though it gets a little messy when the hard drives get full of dust."

The men are up against a crushing deadline: On Friday, Oursler will merge their hi- and low-tech efforts when he unveils his latest installation, a free event at Toronto's Luminato festival.

Oursler's contribution is divided into three parts and three structures. Two Plexiglas sheds, designed to look like houses and outfitted with a collection of flat-screen TVs displaying a pair of fractured narratives, will be situated around the Art Gallery of Ontario. The gallery itself will host a model house in the Young Gallery, on which Oursler will project a third drama.

The installation is a continuation of recent projects Oursler did in Basel, Switzerland, and New York that probed aspects of human need and desire. "I was looking at various disorders as a kind of metaphor for the existential state of human nature," he explains, sitting now one floor above the workshop, in a large rumble room next to the photo studio area where he shoots a lot of his work. (He and his wife, the artist Jacqueline Humphries, live on the top two floors of the four-storey building. A minute ago, their 5 1/2-year-old son Jack, a sweet-faced kid in camouflage pants, appeared at the top of the stairs with a toy microphone, singing the automaton chorus of Kraftwerk's *We Are the Robots*.) "I've been looking at kind of low-end addictions: scratch cards, smoking, general overeating. Not really looking at heavy pathology, but stuff that makes one think about what the state of normal is.

"It's always been my theory that everyone has a little bit of this stuff in them, and in certain people it just goes further out. Game playing might be very closely associated to workaholism. One you're rewarded for and one you're not rewarded for."

The three videos, each about 30 minutes in length, separately probe fear, hoarding and substance abuse.

In the video projected against the model house, one man tries to cure his alter-ego of paralyzing fears. (The two characters are played by a single actor spliced together.) That video is fairly straightforward, unfolding in a linear fashion with comprehensible dialogue, though the acting is in a form that Oursler terms "a little bit expressionistic," which is to say broad. The outdoor pieces are more challenging to apprehend fully, in part because they will play out across six or seven screens in each structure, with characters popping onto one screen for perhaps only a few seconds at a time before disappearing and then reappearing on another screen. The dialogue is also decidedly hallucinatory.

In one of the Plexiglas structures, a fellow dressed as a makeshift superhero argues with a woman about ice cream and whether they can ever leave their house. In the other structure, dubbed "the junk house" because it will contain a sea of second-hand items and a pile of furniture in a side room, a woman berates a man for his refusal to throw out anything. "That's one of the interesting aspects of hoarding," says Oursler. "It's like the physical embodiment of capitalism. People literally replace relationships with objects."

Oursler was born in New York in 1957 and studied at California Institute of the Arts, where he acquired a BFA and, apparently, a slight surfer-dude accent that he still has. He's been working with LCD projections since the early 1990s. In a previous work of public art, installed in Madison Square Park, he projected images upon clouds of mist, neighbouring buildings and trees, to ghostly effect. But less than two months ago, as he was in the final stages of developing the Luminato piece, he realized the scale of the Plexiglas houses presented various obstacles for projection technology, not the least of which was a distinct lack of brightness for the images outdoors. So he switched over to TVs. "Okay, so I'm known for projections, but I'm just gonna try to make this work," he says. "These new flat screens are so interesting, they really are architectural in their nature. And they are the new hearth in the home."

While they give Oursler the ability to play out his videos around the entire structure, rather than just against a surface, he is uncertain of what the final effect will be, since he has not yet tested all of the elements together. But he's optimistic. At some points during the videos, the sheds fill up with fog that catches and amplifies the glow of the flat screen TVs. "It's pretty great, the way these screens get this sci-fi effect. They become less physical," says Oursler. "It should be fairly psychedelic."