

## **L Magazine** **October 27, 2010**

### **Deep in Tony Oursler's Uncanny Valley**

Dierdre Hering

Though the space is peppered with nearly a dozen metal sculptures, the first floor of Lehmann Maupin's Lower East Side location feels nearly empty. The objects stand on rods so thin they hardly seem to take up any space at all, like a forest of leafless saplings. But these barely-there structures hold entire universes, miniature landscapes populated by humans made of light, plagued by existential crises.

Tony Oursler's Peak (through December 5) continues the artist's investigation of the ever-evolving relationship between humans and technology; in this iteration, he deals mainly with the internet. The rods split at face height into two prongs. One holds a diorama made of brightly colored clay and bits of man-made detritus — plastic jewels, dice, figurines. These landscapes are brought to life by the objects occupying the second prong — miniature projectors that shine like garish green suns. They illuminate the sculptures with human figures that interact with Oursler's miniature worlds; they wriggle across sheets of glass, bounce from corner to corner, and crawl over the surfaces of crudely shaped clay, eery distortions moving across the uneven surface. Speakers embedded in the projectors give them voices. They speak in slow, even monotones, a cry of distress ringing out every now and then. "I feel guilty, really I do," one assures the viewer.

Peak is the counterpoint to Valley, Oursler's inaugural show at the Adobe Museum of Digital Media (which exists, appropriately, online and is on view now). The "valley" refers to "the uncanny valley," a robotics theory coined in 1970, stating that robots resembling humans too closely will induce revulsion in the psyche. Oursler takes this theory one step closer to the viewer. He casts the dioramas as representations of the internet, an entity built up of raw informational material that is just as likely to end up intellectual flotsam as anything truly useful. And just as we cast reflections of ourselves on the web through blogging and social networking, Oursler projects human life, actual human figures, across his physical platform. The viewer watches herself live unnaturally on the internet, but today that's come to feel normal; we've traversed the uncanny valley. But when Oursler physically represents our relationship to the internet, literally projecting a human head onto a lump of clay, the effect is terrifying, unsettling, and yes, uncanny.

In "Mirror Return" (2010), Oursler projects his own image onto a small sheet of metal. Shirtless and scared, his likeness speaks in non-sequiturs, growing more and more distressed until his words run together, unintelligible. He turns from the viewer, his true identity an enigma.

"That's so strange. It's just me," he says. "It has to be, but it's not me."