Digital Encounters Interview: Dominic Hawgood

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Brighton Digital Festival and British Science Festival commissioned artist, Dominic Hawgood discusses his new virtual exhibition 'Casting Out The Self' for our Digital Encounters Ideas Series.

PW: For anyone unfamiliar with your work, could you describe your practice?
DH: I'm a cross-disciplinary artist, whose work has emerged out photography's expanded field and currently incorporates installation, CGI, photography, animation, sound, and lighting design. Through the use of light, lens, and code I'm unlocking ways of producing work in other mediums, positioning myself at the departure point of photography into VFX and fields such as computer science, which are changing how we experience realism through imaging technologies and light capture techniques. I'm interested in perception and ways of describing feelings visually, and through installation bring together different mediums to create experience.

© Dominic Hawgood, CGI still from the series 'Casting out the Self, 2017

PW: What is it about working in this way that interests you?
DH: A number of years back I started to feel very restricted by the photographic medium. I wanted to find a way into 3d, but it was intimidating, not only because of its complexity, but the areas of specialism were vast. Photogrammetry was pushing through, emphasis was being placed on the lens, and the potential of the photographic image suddenly extended. I understood this would be my way in, and I began on what was a very steep learning curve. What I discovered was acquiring 3d design and visualisation skills allowed me to develop all aspects of my practice as I could create products, fabricate artworks, build installations, and test all kinds of concepts. It gave me freedom, and I found these new areas of research inspiring, I started learning again.

PW: Many photographers use photography as a method for creating things that can't be seen. Would you say your work takes that line of enquiry?
DH: I don't identify as a photographer, however my use of photography is varied and now often appears as a tool within a larger production process. In the installations I'm making, real or unreal, I'm trying to communicate certain feelings I've experienced, and photography aids that when used in conjunction with other media. I've started approaching projects in a modular way, and as with *Casting Out the Self* it was developed in stages. The metamorphosis of the work creates completely new lines of enquiry, darting off in all kinds of directions as I push into areas that are unfamiliar to me.
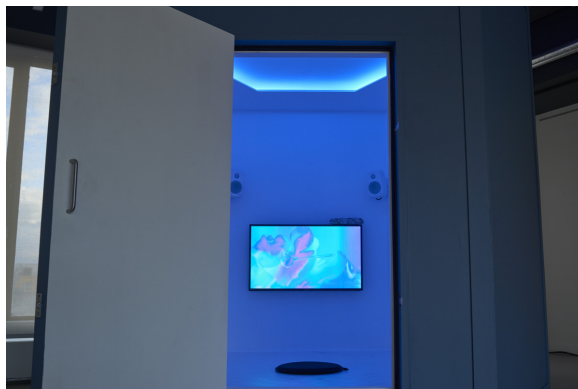
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**PW: Can you talk us through the piece you created for the Brighton Digital Festival?**

DH: For the for British Science Festival & Brighton Digital Festival co-commission I reconstructed a major museum solo exhibition of mine, which was recently, and unexpectedly, cancelled. The solo show was supposed to be a realisation of *Casting Out the Self*, a project inspired by my experience with DMT, and drawing comparisons between this psychedelic and digital aesthetics. Instead I meticulously constructed a CG animation of the imagined exhibition, which was housed inside in a fabricated structure, along with audio I specially commissioned from Lanark Artefax.

I equated my DMT experience to being inside a computer, so when I originally started the project in 2015 I was looking for ways to allude to the transfer from our world (analogue) into the psychedelic (digital). I did this through the implementation of light capture techniques and photogrammetry, taking shamanic and ceremonial objects and transforming them via photographic means. I started to show very high-resolution animations of these scanned objects, I designed a number of light sculptures and had begun exhibiting these with the some of the photographic works. A museum approached me to showcase the entire project, and I set about expanding it to fit three large gallery rooms, for which I proposed and designed numerous large-scale light installations and various other artworks. By the time the show was cancelled it had been resolved, so I was left with a blueprint of an exhibition, along with a lot of photographic documentation and architectural measurements of the real exhibition space I had captured in the planning process.

I decided to recreate the show digitally and set about designing it in software from the ground up, which in hindsight was a little ambitious. Not all the artworks I made existed in reality, some were yet to be realised, if ever, but all were simulated regardless. It was a sophisticated process, requiring in parts, the same level of detail necessary to actually develop a product in the real world eg. I built a functioning lenticular print using manufacturer lens readouts, and a kaleidoscope that formed the illusion of a spherical 3d object. These were projects within projects, and over the course of a few months the geometry was refined, materials built, and cameras animated.

© Dominic Hawgood, photographic documentation from the series 'Casting out the Self, 2017
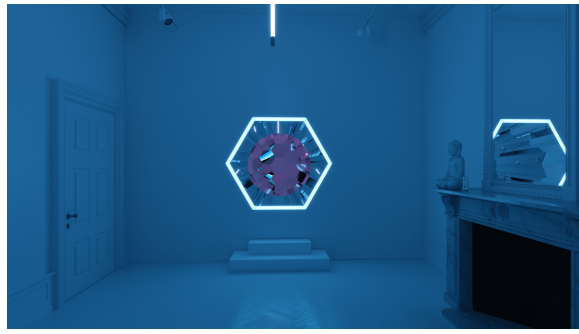
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I secured Lanark Artefax to help with sound design for the animation. I had heard his release on UIQ the previous year and knew immediately I wanted to work with him. We shared a mutual interest in hyper digital aesthetics, so the process of forming the desired sound was effortless, I had clear ideas and feelings I wanted to convey, of being inside a render, of witnessing infinite sharpness, and this was all condensed into the sound texture he produced. The sound and animation were further united through movement; I was looking to simulate games engines FPP such as with UE4, and apply this to photo realistic architectural renders. I managed to record WASD keystrokes, allowing me to animate cameras to audio, and this was combined with smooth panning shots for a dreamlike exploration of a virtual gallery space… a window into a hallucination of kinds.

The artwork was conceived as a single occupancy, sound proofed and treated room, containing speakers and a screen. I translated hexagonal features I came across in ceremonial structures into the design, the interior of which was white, and illuminated by RGB LEDs set into an infinity ceiling. I took details from my renders and incorporated these into the build too, parquet flooring, and the cans of Canowater which the structure sits upon. This all helped create a very surreal scenario when all the elements were experienced as a whole.

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PW: During your recent Instagram takeover you did for us, you debate the importance of gallery shows, questioning whether the documentation becomes more important as legacy for the work than the actual show. Do you think the virtual gallery experience is where the art world is headed?

DH: I started to digitally construct exhibitions as a response to limitations being experienced as an emerging artist. *Casting Out the Self* challenges the role of the gallery, and it poses a number of questions regarding the importance of the documentation. My argument is that documentation now carries an incredible weight… you only have to look towards social media to understand the power and consumption of imagery. I realised the confusion over authenticity when a site published rendered documentation of a solo show I produced thinking it was real, this was a couple of years back. I've been thinking about virtual shows since then, and having produced the current one, there are many reasons why I feel a rendered one could be more real such as the ability to explore from any angle, in different media, and in more immersive ways. I think the documentation of gallery shows is undervalued, and seldom moves beyond photographic stills and 360 panoramic walkthroughs. There's huge potential to extend the gallery experience, I attempted it by creating a narrative that unfolds in this liminal space. I liked the idea that the documentation itself becomes the artwork.

PW: The image of the Buddha features a lot in your work, could you explain a bit about this?

DH: Back in 1996 Marc Levoy was working on computational realism and light field theory at Stanford. He produced a classic paper for SIGGRAPH in which he offered a technique for interpolating between images to create a new synthetic camera angle that was constructed from samples of other images. The object he tested this on was a statue of a Buddha. Within the CG community the Buddha is now a render standard, an object used to test lighting and materials upon, but the icon also appeared in the modern psychedelic ceremonies I was researching. It was perfect for the digital world I was discussing.