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'Suspended Animation' may be the Hirshhorn's trippiest exhibit yet

by Sadie Dingfelder

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Imagine a future where we've lost the ability to feel sad. It was beaten out of us by a relentless stream of advertisements immersing us in increasingly realistic fantasy worlds, free of sorrow and strife. To put us back in touch with our tears, a progressive government agency launches a public service campaign using the very tools that alienated us from our feelings in the first place. That's the premise for a new installation called "The Pleasure of Being Sad" by French artist Antoine Catala — one of six artists exploring humanity's relationship with the digital world in a new Hirshhorn exhibit, "Suspended Animation," which opened on Feb. 10.

"I thought it would be funny to make an advertisement, but instead of trying to sell happiness like we usually do, trying to sell sadness," Catala says.

His futuristic ad, about the size of one you'd see at a train station or bus stop, features videos of attractive, tear-streaked models projected onto a flexible plastic screen. Every so often, a puff of air causes a grid of tear shapes to push the screen from behind, embossing the main image.

"Here we have a screen that has humanlike qualities," says Gianni Jetzer, the show's curator and the Hirshhorn's new curator-at-large. "It's almost living, because it's breathing. It mimics an organism that is alive."

Exploring how we flesh-and-blood humans respond to artificial life is the theme of "Suspended Animation," Jetzer says, and some of the life forms on view are rather sexy.

For instance, a naked avatar reminiscent of a young Jude Law stars in a video by British artist Ed Atkins called "Warm, Warm, Warm Spring Mouths."

Stranded in his digital world, the avatar taps on the screen and expresses frustration at his inability to connect with the real world. Borrowing lines from poet Gilbert Sorrentino, the avatar says, among other things, "I don't want to hear any news on the radio about the weather on the weekend" — getting at the idea that the representation of weather (hearing about it) is not nearly as satisfying as going outdoors and feeling the rain on your face.

"On one hand, he is kind of human, but on the emotional level he's not really able to relate to what he is speaking about," Jetzer says.

The avatar's frustration reminds us humans that we, too, live in a world that isn't altogether real. Take, for instance, the images of celebrities and politicians, which are so realistic and pervasive that we forget we've never seen these people in the flesh. American artist Josh Kline explores that illusion with his video piece, "Hope and Change."

In it, an alternate-universe Obama delivers a fiery 2009 inauguration address, which includes a rousing indictment against "the Washington, D.C., gun mafia, [which] keeps blackmailing Congress and blocking the passage of sensible gun laws," "rogue bankers" and "corporations who duck out on taxes and ship jobs overseas and then expect us to bail them out."

This liberal fever dream comes courtesy of face-mapping software, which allowed Kline to digitally paste Obama's face onto an impersonator. The effect is uncanny — sometimes you see traces of the impersonator's eyes above Obama's — and intentionally so, Jetzer says.

"It's like this strange double persona, a digital Frankenstein, and it shows, on one hand, all the many manipulations that can be done, and on the other hand, the failure of impersonators and the filter of software to make a true facsimile," he says.

As technology improves, it will be increasingly difficult to tell the difference between real and virtual worlds, Jetzer says, which makes this exhibit all the more thought-provoking.

"For me, what is really important is to show how we relate to electronic characters and how the carnal body gets replaced by the electronic body," Jetzer says.