

STUDIO VISIT : DIGITAL ARTIST AND PAINTER EMMA STERN

By Evan Malachosky
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**WE VISIT HER BROOKLYN SPACE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW SHE MAKES
PHYSICAL ARTWORK BASED ON NON-PHYSICAL SPACES**

Perhaps surprising for those who have seen artist Emma Stern's work online, paint is omnipresent in her Brooklyn studio. It's on canvases, the worn-in wooden floor, tools and at the feet of furniture. Perhaps less surprising, there are also two computers in the space. A laptop sits open with a digital version of one of her characters blown up in an editing application, while a desktop computer sits at its own station—a red Solo cup full of brushes teeters next to the display.



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Stern bounces between internet application and canvas, cross-referencing 3D renderings with her painted scenes. Nearby, a body-length pillow (which occupies the entire width of her sofa) features an avatar-like version of herself—or something close, she clarifies. “I think that differentiating too much between ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ life is a disservice to both experiences,” she says. “The virtual is very much real, and my online life is very much my real life. One of things that is so cool about being an artist in the 21st century, and one of the reasons I feel so lucky to be making work in and about this specific moment, is because of that duality. The avatar I made of myself (which appears in my digital work from time to time) is a palpable representation of that idea.”

Stern has built herself an entire world: one that houses all of her characters and allows her work to grow from a pre-existing starting point. That starting point dates back to the earliest iterations of digital profiling, she explains. “I grew up in the Golden Age of Myspace and, as an adolescent outcast growing up in a small town, the idea of creating an online identity that could be anything I wanted was extremely appealing to me,” she says. “I see those early explorations of online selfhood as a precursor to my current interest in avatars and virtual selves.”



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While Stern built herself a digital persona, she was studying physical art—particularly painting—and inherited 15th century influences. “I come from an extremely traditional background of classical, academic figure painting. Michelangelo and Caravaggio were my idols growing up, and I spent the better part of a decade trying to emulate their style when I first began painting seriously, which is where the motivation to work in oil on canvas came from,” she says. “There are several main things that have really stuck with me from that time, including appreciation for the formal portraiture format, use of chiaroscuro contrast, and the traditional technical process of monochromatic underpainting.”



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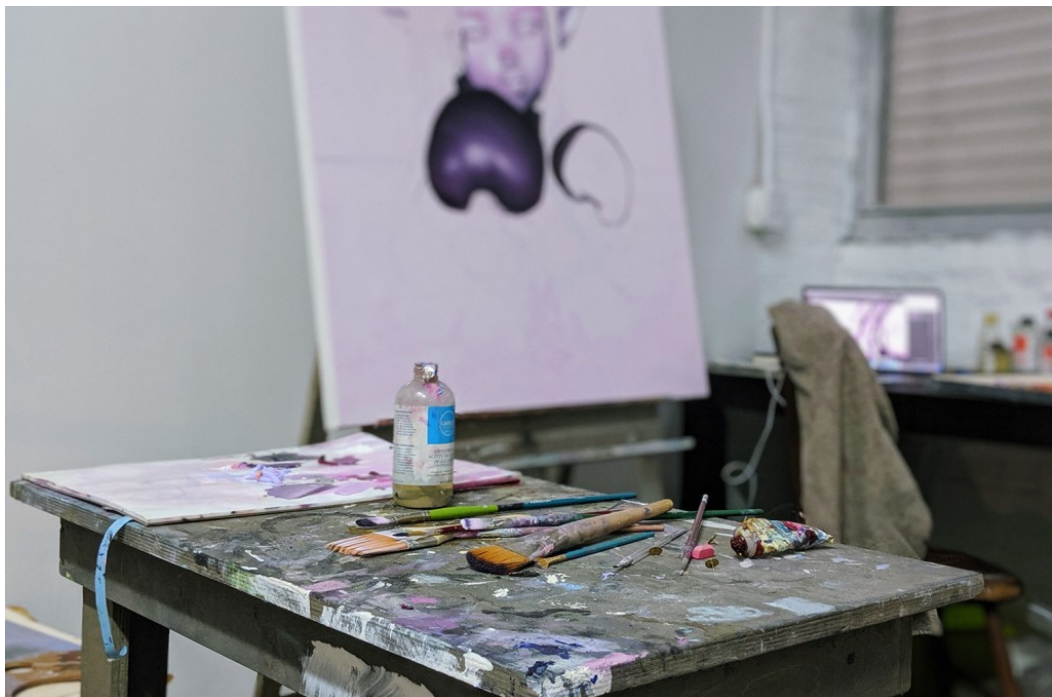
“My subjects are virtual avatars I’ve created within specialized 3D software,” she says. “I think of them as my muses, which is another concept I borrow from Surrealism. Man Ray, Max Ernst and Dalí all had these beautiful women who appeared over and over in their work, always without context, mannerisms or idiosyncrasies—just these seductive yet featureless protagonists who are on this Earth to be the subjects of artworks.”

Stern also doesn’t spend a lot of time creating histories and narratives for her subjects. “That’s not really what they’re about,” she says. “They don’t have ‘destinies’ because they are sort of just vacant containers, which is part of what drew me to them as subjects in the first place. I think the fact that they are these empty vessels for projection makes them function as self-portraits in some strange way. This allows me as a female painter to reimagine historical dynamics between artist and muse, and ultimately to enter a larger dialogue surrounding the female body—both in art history and in the context of an increasingly digital world.”



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Her process begins with an initial figure which is then turned into 3D rendering and ultimately a painted replication. It is deeply intertwined with current debates about technology. How seamless should our internet and IRL existences become? Are we different people online and on the street? What's really down in the "dark web"? Who's responsible for what surfaces from there?



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“I think what my work is most critical of is the inherent inclination toward pornographic (or at least porn-adjacent) representations of women throughout cyberspace. Specifically, how much of the avatar-creation software programs widely available today contain within them the flaws and biases of the humans who create them,” she explains. “As our virtual selves become ever-more inextricable from our physical selves, I’m interested in how the preferences of the programmers are imposed on virtual female bodies within the largely male-dominated arena of software and technology.”

She explains that the avatar she made of herself was intended to follow this theme, “Which is why I chose to embellish and exaggerate certain features rather than create a truly realistic facsimile,” she says. “In spite of that, I actually tend to have a pretty optimistic outlook on technology. I am motivated by the immense potential for transformation within our new virtual bodies, as biology is replaced by more flexible systems that can be reconfigured at will.”



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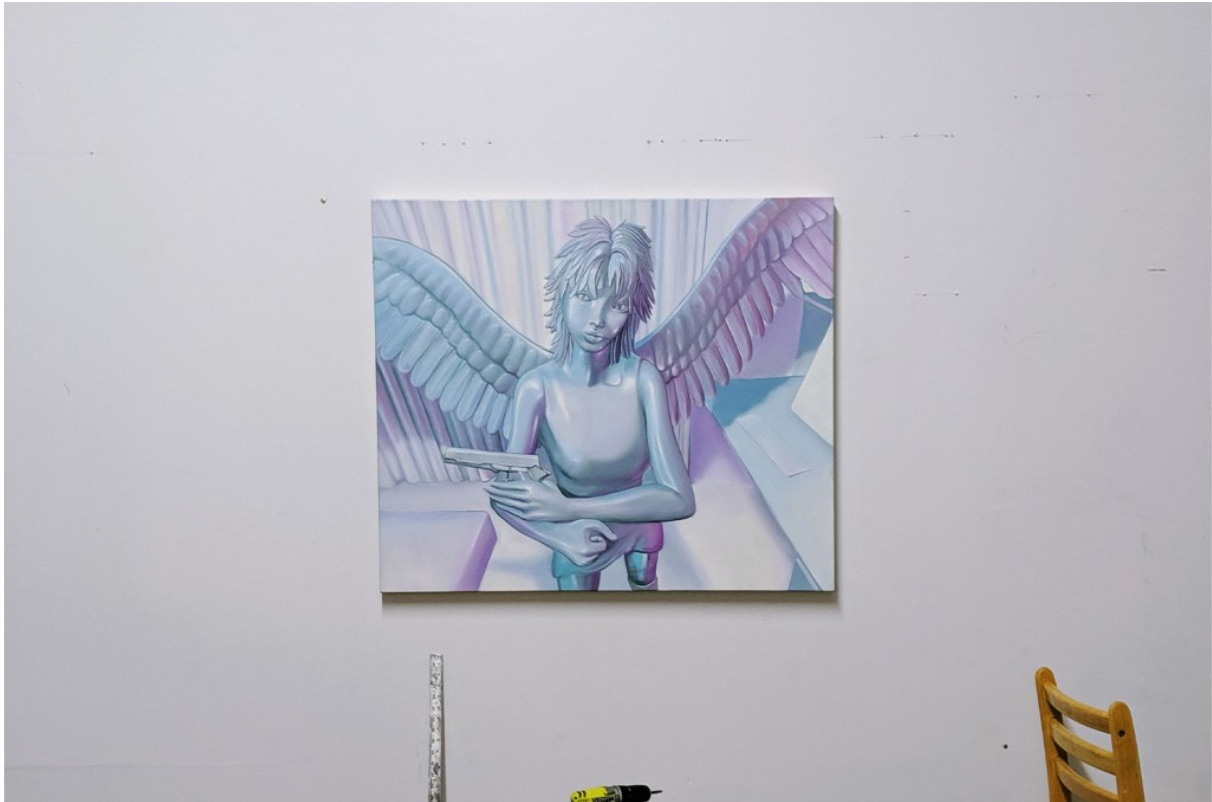
This interest and enthusiasm for technology is evident throughout Stern’s space. On an ottoman, Julius Wiedemann’s 2002 book *Digital Beauties: 2D and 3D CG Digital Models* sits atop the first issue of *PC Erotic*, a magazine by Iris Luz and published by Ditto. The latter, Stern explains, “celebrates and attempts to understand the complex issues brought up by human sexuality and technology.” The duality of humanity and humanity’s tendency to sexualize, remains omnipresent.



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“I try not to make any hierarchical distinctions between the virtual and the ‘real,’ but I also recognize the fact that an overwhelming majority of people who ever lay eyes on my work will be seeing it as a thumbnail on a screen—so I do believe that needs to be a consideration,” she explains. “The fact that artworks now have the potential to exist non-locally is such a fascinating and truly contemporary phenomenon. As a painter, this is something so strange to grapple with, because of the medium’s multi-century history as a material-based practice, which ultimately produces physical objects that take up space and have weight. But, in this hyper-real era, everything is in quotation marks: art is now ‘art,’ artist is now ‘artist,’ and it is beginning to feel to me like these concepts are becoming more real, more important, and contain more information than the actual things they signify. So I guess my paintings exist in real-life, but my ‘paintings’ exist online?”

This isn’t exclusive to her, or artists whose subjects are so linked back to the ongoing of the internet. Indirectly, Stern references artists who operate within a gray area, prefacing their output with quotation marks. “Art,” as she puts it, can be anything or nothing at all. The empty space in her work, the rooms in which her characters could seemingly live (something akin to Sims or RPG games), is equally as engaging. Where are these characters? Where are we witnessing them? Where have they been pulled from? How does Stern impart her own influences and experiences? In many ways, her paintings appear as postcards from the other side of the internet—insight into a faraway place with context from her.



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“I love the idea of postcards from cyberspace! I have never used that term specifically, but I have similarly described my paintings before as ‘artifacts’ of virtual environments,” she says. “Aside from Renaissance painting, another genre that seriously influenced me when I was learning to paint was Surrealism. What was so fascinating to me was the emphasis on dreams and the subconscious consistent among all Surrealists. They would do things like meditate, or keep dream logs, or induce hallucinations with drugs or hypnotism or sleep deprivation, anything to trigger some state change and deliver them to some alternate reality. The art they made following these experiences are fragments of what they were able to ‘bring back’ with them, like souvenirs—or postcards.”

This approach, Stern explains, “continues to affect me immensely, and is why I remain fascinated with creating physical artworks based on things I observe in non-physical space. There is an obvious parallel between the subconscious and the virtual landscape, and I have said before that I believe the imagination is the original VR—although the graphics kind of suck.”