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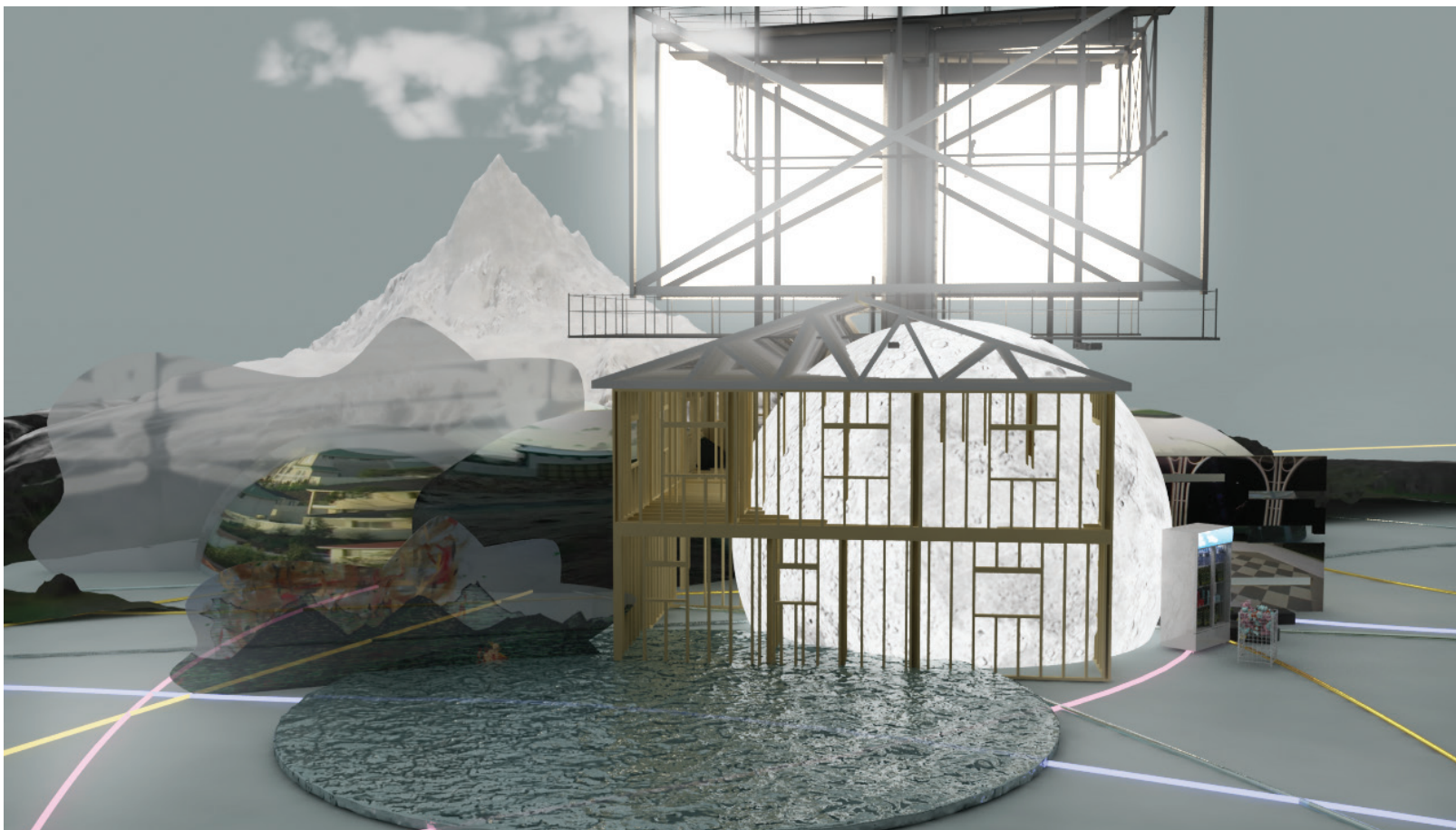
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Everything, 2008. Still, 3 channel HD video animation, 5min. Courtesy the artist, Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane and Gallery9, Sydney.

SCIENCE FICTION AND THE ANTINOMY OF IMAGES

PETER ALWAST | ADAM GECZY

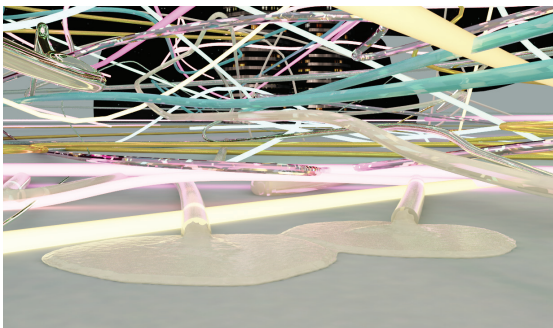
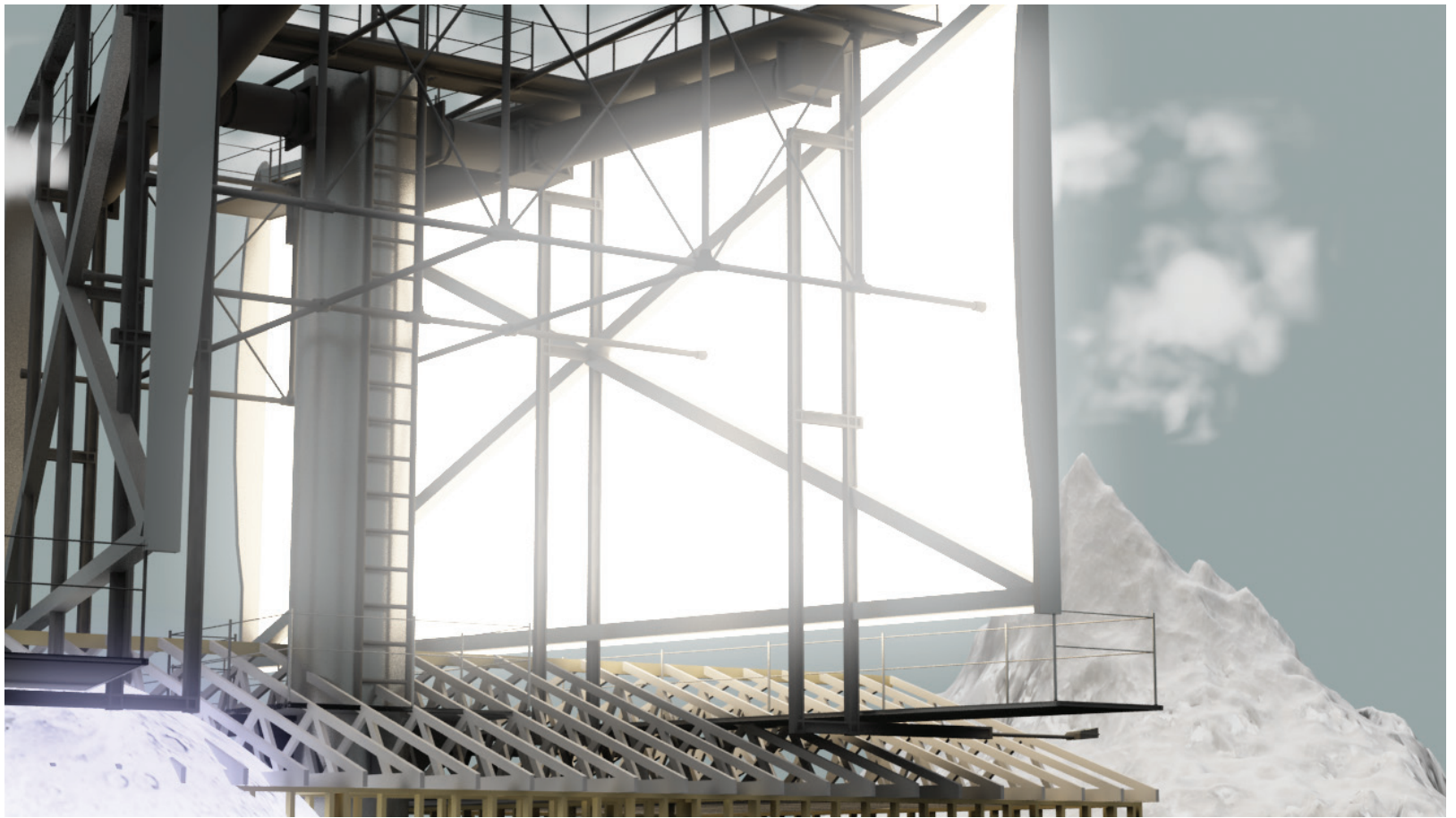
‘As you see, we are humanoids, but we are different from you’

War of the Robots (1978)

While Science Fiction can lay claim to the most cited split infinitive (‘to boldly go where no one has gone before’), it is never noticed that the term itself, science fiction, is the most blatant of oxymorons. In principle, science does not permit of fiction. In general parlance at least (leaving aside irrational numbers or Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle), science is about facts and certainty, not invention and metaphor. But one of the compelling aspects of successful science fiction is how convinced we are of its premises, which are the effects of technology and population growth gone amuck. It is also a genre that reflects back to us the truth, albeit graphic and overblown, about

the extent to which our lives are inseparable from the rationalisation of technology. The natural and the natural body are just imaginary categories on the sliding scale of technological mediation. In video, painting, drawing and photography, Peter Alwast explores these notions by confounding the division between the manual and the digital, the natural and the artificial. His work continually sets up visual conflicts and contradictions, achieved by creating a tension between two images or sequences within a work, or through juxtaposition. Everything in Alwast’s world is seen through a heavily filtered lens. It is a room of mirrors in which more than one mirror is askew.

Given its play of surfaces and mixed realities, Alwast’s work is closely tied to the early twentieth century technique of collage and its filmic equivalent, montage. When Picasso introduced a piece of chair caning to a painting in 1912 (*Still Life With Chair Caning*), he broke the imaginary line between object and representation. He also created a chaotic relay between abstraction (it was a Cubist painting) and the literal, material object. In doing so the chair caning both announced itself as such, and collapsed into the abstract shapes of which it is comprised. The Dadaists would bring collage to good use by depicting modernity as a maelstrom of arbitrary and discordant elements. Artists such as Hannah Höch and the Surrealists’ Max Ernst would turn the available world into a rich and sometimes disconcerting fantasy land. In film, Sergei Eisenstein reorganised time and space to create a whole new filmic world that, nonetheless, uncannily replicated the fold of mental image and outer perception, showing us what we thought we already knew, that we inhabit several image-worlds at once.

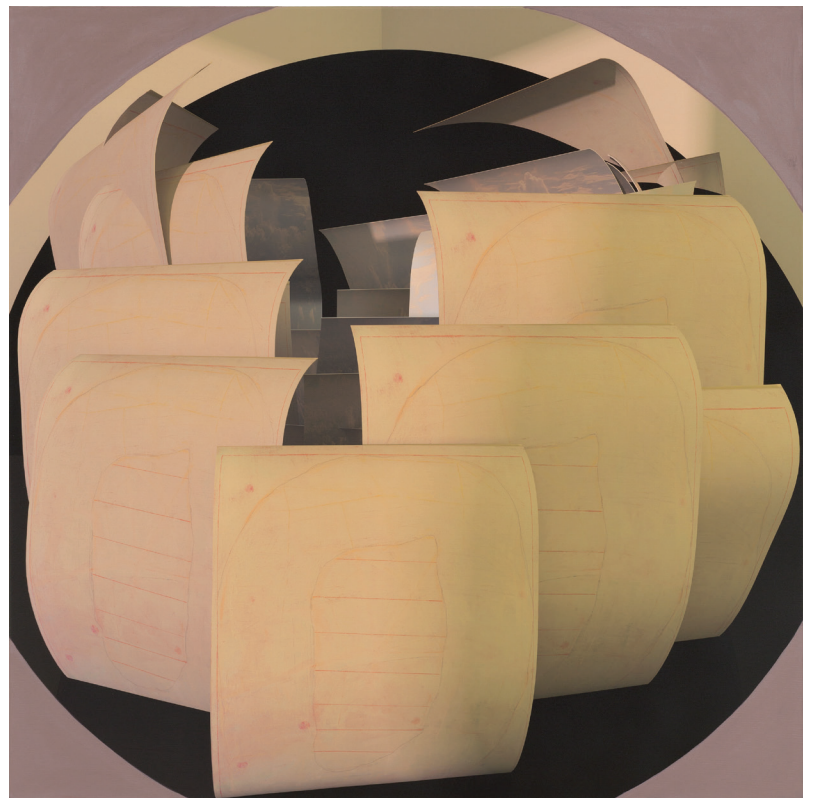
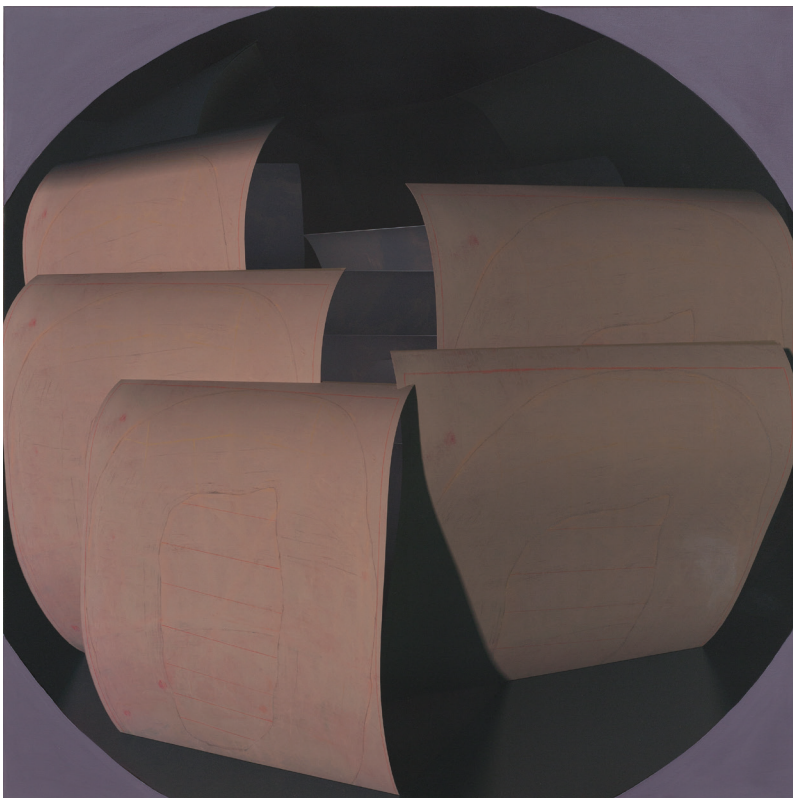
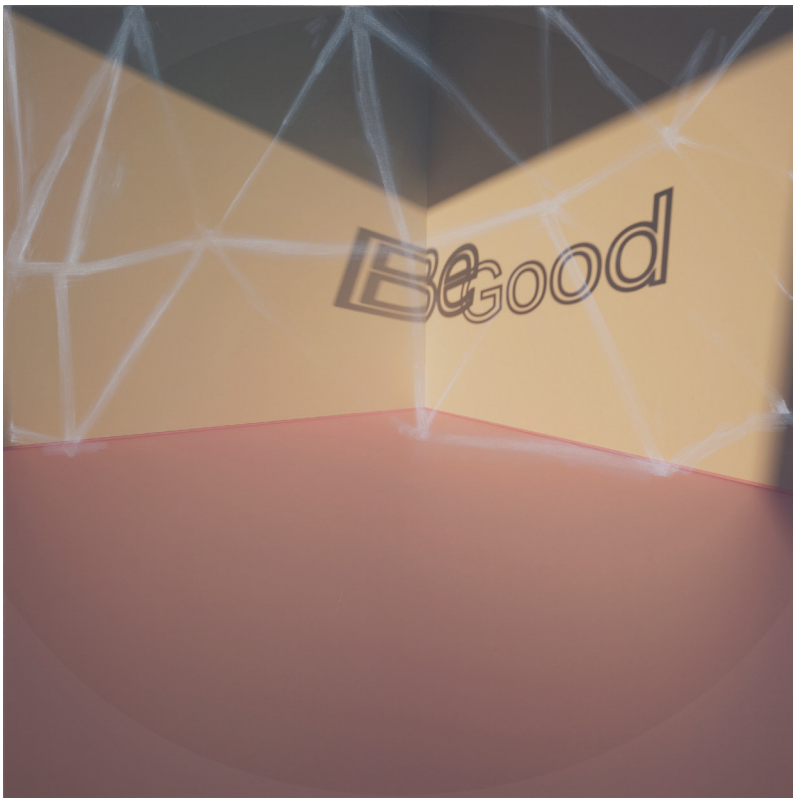


clockwise from top: *Everything*, 2008. Still, 3 channel HD video animation, 5min; *Swipe*, 2008. Oil and Giclée print on canvas, 132 x 71cm; *Everything*, 2008. Still, 3 channel HD video animation, 5min; *Everything*, 2008. Still, 3 channel HD video animation, 5min. Courtesy the artist, Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane and Gallery9, Sydney.

Perhaps the classical antecedent to the confusion of representation and life is in the painter from Greek antiquity, Parrhasius. As recounted by Pliny the Elder, Zeuxis and Parrhasius decided to compete to determine who was the greater artist. Their paintings complete, Zeuxis drew back the curtain to reveal a still life so lifelike that some birds mistook it for real fruit and collided into the wall. Then Zeuxis asked his rival to remove the curtain from his painting only to find that the curtain itself was part of the painting. The consummate case of *trompe l'oeil*, Zeuxis announced that while he had duped the birds, Parrhasius had duped him. In a similar vein, Alwast's works are frequently in layers, asking us to seek out their layers of deception and alteration.

In the painting *Swipe* (2008), a photographic image of a yellow car, possibly in motion, looms behind a thin skin of dragged white paint. The right two thirds of the canvas are bands of grey paint that approximate an enlargement of the same gesture. They differ from Roy Lichtenstein's enlargements, as they can be taken for simple stripes. The left of the car is partially concealed by some architectural element, whose block-like character vaguely echoes the bands to the right. Alwast purposely disrupts the most basic premises of looking at a work of art, which is based on the agreement that, first, one is looking at a work of art, and then, what kind of art; in this case a painting. Is this work more about the act of painting or of effacement, the deletion of painting, its annulment? The identifiable content is left deeply remote in terms of its anecdote or context, intended to tease the beholder with mild assurance as to what is being seen. If this work is about anything it is not the car or the architecture nearby, it is about levels of obscurity.

The same car and the architectural fragments resurface in the three-channel video *Everything* (2008). Intended to be projected on a large scale so that the objects appear life-size, Alwast presents a depopulated world that is dreamlike in proportion and intensity. The video begins with three different images of the top of the same building structure, which then converge and unify as our view descends to a landscape in which movement is only in some occasional reflections and the video itself. The car is immobile and set against a domed object that seems to contain yet another world, this time with moving cars and objects. A voice speaks to us, a street preacher with some 'end is nigh' message; this is overlaid by the sound of bagpipes as a generic snow-capped mountain rises into view. There are numerous visual iterations and puns here, such as that of the pipes depicted in the work and the sound



clockwise from top left. **Construction**, 2013. Oil stick on Giclée print on canvas, 76 x 76cm; **Grandma And Me**, 2013. Oil and Giclée print on canvas, 110 x 110cm; **In Addition**, 2013. Giclée print on canvas (unique), 110 x 110cm; **Something Instead Of Nothing**, 2013. Giclée print on canvas (unique), 110 x 110cm. All from Duets, 2013. Courtesy the artist, Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane and Gallery9, Sydney.

of the bagpipes, but again the import of this work is left open-ended, confined to the way in which the signs of the lived, actual world are fragmented and remade as obliquely interlocking units. It is the closest thing to video Cubism that I know. It is well to note that Picasso, Braque and their circle would at times speak of Cubism as a realism, but a realism

that revealed the fourth dimension, the temporality of objects in space. This could only be represented by disengaging the object from its habitual representation and reconceiving it as a phenomenon outside of habit and association. For all its difficulty, there is something mysterious but also startling about Cubism, which was full of jokes and visual games. Equally, if this work is sinister and unaccountable, it is so with a light touch.

The shifts in perspective find a different configuration in the video *Things were Really Good for Us Then* (2011). The work begins with a text at the base of the screen, set against an almost black ground

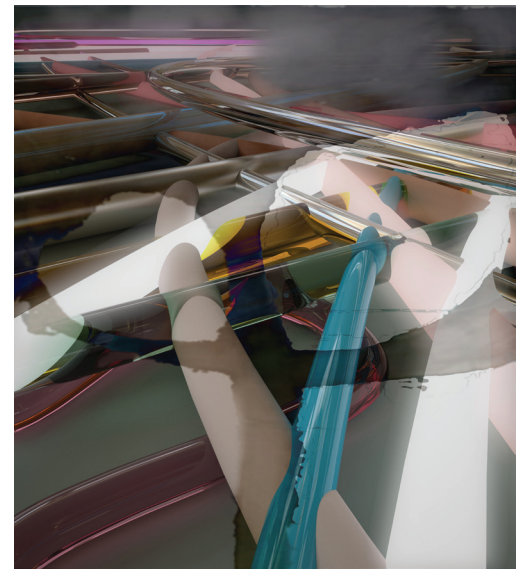
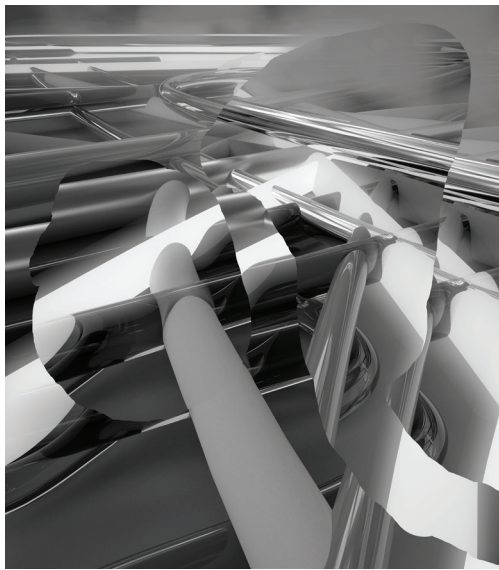
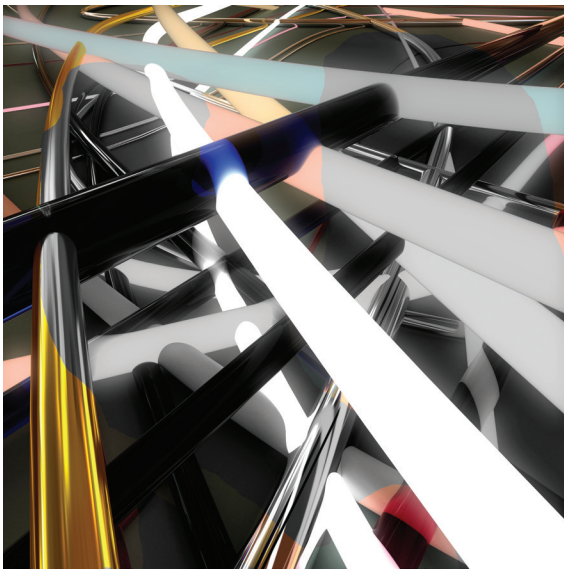


clockwise from top left: Duets installation view; *Harlequin*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 140 x 190cm; Duets installation view. Courtesy the artist, Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane and Gallery9, Sydney.

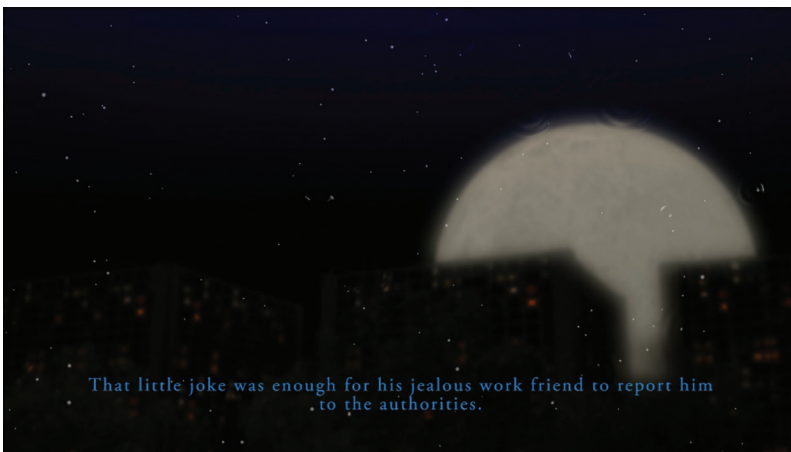
THIS IS A WORLD OF IMAGES, AND IMAGES OVER IMAGES, IMAGES ABOUT IMAGES ABOUT IMAGES.

speckled with small blurred dots of various colours. Some are white and descend like snow, while the others remain stationary. The story recounts an incident about 'my father' who was born in 1900 in Russia. The story is told from the perspective of the artist's grandmother. In mixed company, in 1937, the father makes a passing comment about the obvious incompatibility in the marriage of Stalin who, at the age of forty-one, was to wed a girl of sixteen. The father was later hauled away as a 'national traitor', and the family thrown from their house. Tragic, and tragically familiar of those times, the story is straightforward enough. But as it unfolds the contours of a white disc begin to emerge from what appear to be buildings, rising slowly. As the disc appears, the surface becomes stippled with smaller circles, like those created from droplets in water. Meanwhile the 'snow' continues to fall downward. We begin to recognise the array of lights as a cityscape by night. Artfully, the artist does not end the video after the narrative is complete but allows us time to consider the vague and illogical dark space, which we realise is encountered on separate axes, but all on the same screen. But somehow the resultant images seem to have a strange congruence, symbolic of the extreme difference between an event recounted several times removed in voice and time, and the event itself. The dark, with its minute telltale glimmers, is also all that is left of the memory of the man who was never seen again, most probably sent to perish in a gulag.

Also from 2011, a suite of videos exhibited at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane, continues Alwast's interest in the overlay of the real and the virtual, and the simulation of situations in which possibility, or plausibility, is bent out of shape. One sequence had a computer generated man and woman on each end of a screen, rising and falling as if from walking, yet not moving. Another channel was of a spiralling, rounded, white corrugated shape, like the billowings from a pleated sail, or else a mobile, pliant shell. At certain intervals in its slow hypnotic motion it spewed, from its centre, a profusion of letters that disappeared like confetti into the airless air. Confetti also featured in the video that comprised two layers, one on top of another. In the lower layer, an out of screen presence exhaled a breath which activated a pile of paper fragments into the air, over an installation of coloured pipes and upright black circles. In the frame above, a series of words and phrases such as 'working', 'fucking', 'sleeping'; 'am yours', and so on, gyrated languidly in space. A neighbouring work saw the spinning of a top, but



THE MOTIFS ... BUILD UPON THEMSELVES, ESTABLISHING AN OPAQUE, PRIVATE LANGUAGE THAT IS IN CONSTANT, PRIVATE DIALOGUE WITH ITSELF.



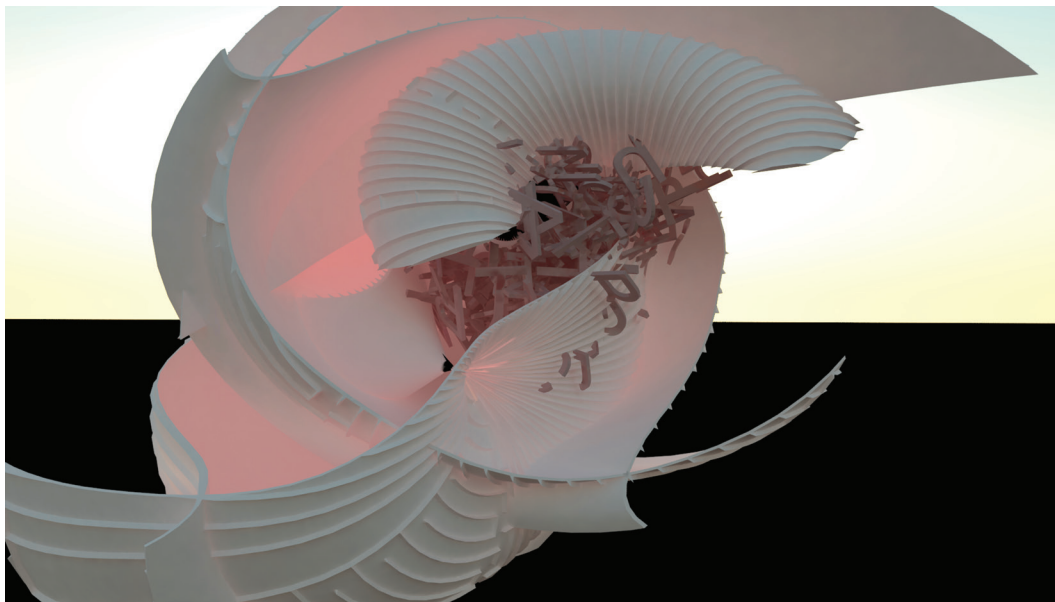
top, from left: *We All Know What is Down Below*, 2013. Giclée print on Hahnemühle paper (unique), 95 x 98cm; *Last Night We Found Out How It All Worked Together*, 2013. Giclée print on Hahnemühle paper (unique), 110 x 100cm; *Over Here And Over There*, 2013. Giclée print on Hahnemühle paper (unique), 157 x 140cm. bottom: *Before The Joke Things Were Really Good For Us Then*, 2011. Stills, HD video animation, 3.5min. Courtesy the artist, Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane and Gallery9, Sydney.

this was placed in an oddly amorphous shape to the side of a bare white room. The shape was like an insert into a different realm. Again, Alwast purposely converted the space from something recognisable to something deadpan and strange. Finally, there were the three blocks, all virtually rendered, in the primaries red, yellow and blue. Resembling something between plastic ice coolers and coffins, these fell from on high and scattered slowly on the floor.

If these works were hard to decipher, the title of the ensemble gave some kind of key: Future Perfect. We might recall the science fiction film *Gattaca* (1997), where the semblance of a perfect world is created by differentiating between the 'Valid's' and

the 'in-Valid's', namely those with superior and those with defective genetic material. In this future age, it is the predetermination of the capacity of one's genes that determine one's status in society. But one in-Valid (Ethan Hawke) manages to usurp a Valid's identity and make his way to a space mission. While the plot may have the attributes of your standard underdog-flouts-fate kind, it also has a deeper message, that the scientific rationalisation of culture is more porous, and indeed more ideological than scientific. The so-called perfect future, as ordained by rational and scientific models, is always incongruous with its outcomes. Alwast's cryptic and amusing sequences are like blueprints from an unrealisable world, a sort of futuristic, digitally conceived purgatory.

The two-layered video from *Future Perfect* supplies the key, or coda, to the most recent body of work, *Duets*, exhibited at Gallery 9, Sydney, in early 2013. As indicated in the title, there were two series of works, or two trajectories, the first paintings, the second digitally manipulated photographs using the paintings as their subject. They encapsulate the stimulating, aesthetic, back-and-forth movement that is a relevant contribution to the notion of contemporary painting and its afterlife, after its many 'deaths'. For to say that the paintings were the originals, and that they had a priority in terms of bearing the artist's indexical mark, would be specious, since it is only in the light of their doctored,



EVERYTHING IN ALWAST'S WORLD IS SEEN THROUGH A HEAVILY FILTERED LENS. IT IS A ROOM OF MIRRORS IN WHICH MORE THAN ONE MIRROR IS ASKEW.



Future Perfect, 2011. Stills, multi channel video animation, infinite loops. Courtesy the artist, Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane and Gallery9, Sydney.

'developed', versions that we consider them. Or rather the perceptual experience is one of constant relay between one picture and its cousin.

The relationship between painting and photography is a well-worn field, however there are few painters who elaborate this so overtly and in a way that neither takes precedence. Usually, either the painting takes over from the photograph (as in the works of Malcolm Morley, Richard Estes, Chuck Close), or the painting shows its allegiance to photography in its sympathy to being photographed (Gerhard Richter's abstract works), or photographs are made about looking at painting (Thomas Struth), or made as if the scene were a painterly tableau (Jeff Wall). By contrast, Alwast's *Duet* sets up an interplay between both. His tendency to work over previous material is relevant to the way in which the motifs in his works build upon themselves, establishing an opaque, private language that is in constant, private dialogue with itself.

A personal reference, however muted, is maintained, such as Alwast's Russian grandmother embedded within abstract forms. It could be all too easy to interpret her as some vestige from memory. It would be better to see her as the subjective element that persists even once the images and their cryptic logic have taken over. This is a world of images, and images over images, images about images

about images. And yet rupture can always be anticipated in any logic that wants to appear infallible. In Alwast's work, images are given free reign to create and recreate themselves. Yet there are reminders that these images will always be anchored to some place or time in the putatively real world. ■

Dr Adam Geczy is an artist and writer who is Senior Lecturer in Sculpture, Performance and Installation at Sydney College of the Arts.