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Art & Technology Jeffrey Wisniewski's *Battle of the Buddha*: Is Motion Capture the Next New Thing in Video Art?

By Victoria Ellison Wed., Dec. 14 2011 at 11:11 AM
Categories: Art, Art & Technology, Film, Video Art

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Jeffrey Wisniewski

Wisniewski's battling Buddhas: Hollywood high tech with art world cred
Sculptor Jeffrey Wisniewski, known for dismantling an American colonial home and feeding it into a woodchipper, piece by piece, somewhat in the spirit of celebrated house-chipping artist Gordon Matta-Clark. He is also an art director for Steven Spielberg's new film *The Adventures of Tintin* and was assistant director of *Avatar*.

Wisniewski's current work at Patrick Painter Inc blazes a pioneering path for the art world into motion capture-video, and blends the boundaries of what is art, what is video art, and what is commercial short-subject film. He enlisted Giant Studios, which worked on *Avatar*, to do the motion capture -- a process in which an actor's movements are digitally recorded and then converted into animation.

Battle of the Buddha shows a Shrek-like deity who morphs into two Buddhas who stretch and grimace Sumo-style, throw down their robes, comically deliver fierce kicks to the groin and Hulk-like spins in the air, then meld back again into one floating gummy-bearish divine being. The six-minute film took years, with support from prestigious Artpace and more than 40 collaborators.

Here's our Q&A with Wisniewski:

How did you come to do this work after 15 years as an artist in New York City?

My friend [Oscar-winning cinematographer] Janusz Kaminski told me there was work out here in film. I visited an old friend, Thom Merrick, the artist, in Wonder Valley, which borders Joshua Tree, and bought a few broken-down houses on 20 acres that I turned into a studio.

Janusz set up a meeting for me with Rick Carter, Spielberg's production designer. One day as I was driving down the 101, he called and asked if I wanted to go to Budapest. The next week I was in Hungary working on *Munch*. Rick knew I was a sculptor and asked if I could help out building weird models [for] a small experiment Jim Cameron was working on. It turned out to be *Avatar* and I had become an expert in motion capture.

Rick told me I had to work on *Tintin*, because he wanted to be sure there was someone visual on the set.

What was the process on *Battle of the Buddha*? How much is your hand literally on the artwork? Did you work primarily as a conceptual artist?

I worked with Matthew Drutt of Artpace in San Antonio for two years. I then presented the project to Matt Madden of Giant Studios. I worked with a modeler, Lennon Montejo. Then we did the capture day with stuntmen, the guys at Giant and Mauro Fiore, the [director of photography] of *Avatar* and a lifelong collaborator and childhood friend who did the virtual camera.

Is there any connection with your acclaimed house-put-through-a-wood-chipper?

Yes. It was a classic American icon, a stereotypical dream home. There was a ghostly quality to it, a romantic nostalgia. The Buddhas are very similar in that the content is very loaded but simple.

Is there a good Buddha and a bad Buddha?

No, I think that was a mistake in the press release, there is a gold and a crimson one. I always thought of it as a communist and capitalist.

Mo-cap is getting huge in movies -- there's a big push to get Andy Serkis considered for best actor in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*.

Andy is great. He was Captain Haddock in *Tintin*. He went to school to be a painter. He deserves any award he gets.

His is your mo-cap different?

It's not different, it's the same.

Couldn't your artwork play in a major film festival as well as a gallery setting? How does the context change the work?

I have never entered it into a film festival. I would like to someday.

Do you think motion capture could become a viable process for video artists?

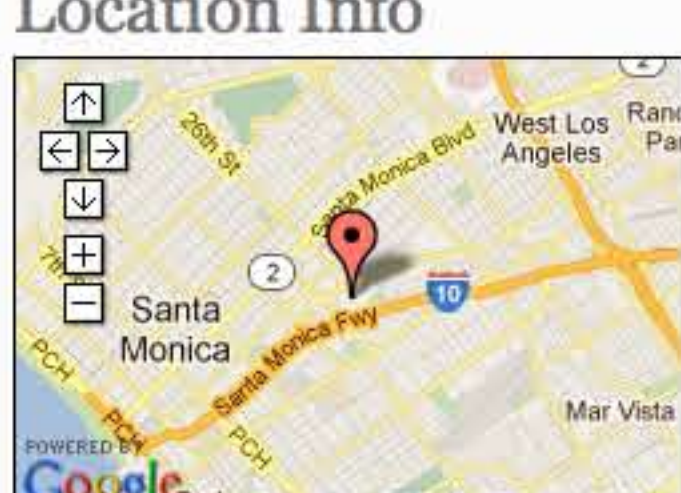
Yes, definitely. We use a technique called simulcam that can intermix with live action footage. The possibilities are endless. I think you will see a blend of art, film, and digital games -- the technologies are here.

At what point will prices make mo-cap a truly popular art form for individual artists?

I think it is already here. On the set of *Tintin*, Steven Spielberg joked with Peter Jackson that we should make motion capture kits and sell them at Walmart.

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The video, which I have seen, is a masterwork and is a major step forward in the digital/film future

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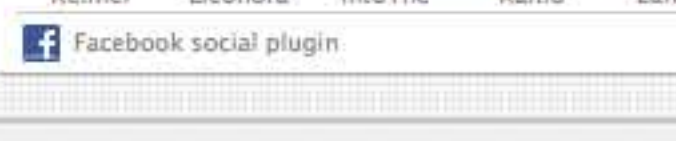


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