

Majeski, Anna. "Knep's 'Exempla' uses interactive digital media to explore serious questions." *The Tufts Daily*, Friday, October 9, 2009.

Knep's 'Exempla' uses interactive digital media to explore serious questions

Gallery Review

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Published: Friday, October 9, 2009

Updated: Friday, October 9, 2009



Courtesy Brian Knep for The Tufts University Art Gallery
Brian Knep's show at the Tufts University Art Gallery intimately involves the visitor.



Courtesy Brian Knep for The Tufts University Art Gallery
Brian Knep presents unique and interactive works of art in his new exhibition.

Boston-area artist Brian Knep reinterprets the drives that motivate humanity in his exhibit, "Exempla," now at the Koppelman Gallery in the Tufts University Art Gallery. Heavy topic though this may be, Knep makes the refreshing choice to breach the serious subject with a sense of humor. Using an interactive digital medium and whimsically drawn creatures, in his six pieces Knep examines the impetus behind our choices as human beings.

The pieces, with titles such as "Escape" (2008), "Excel" (2009) and "Embark" (2009), are all projected onto the darkened gallery walls. The digital images begin with thousands of small stick-figure characters in a certain formation. The characters themselves resemble line drawings of eggs with crude faces, legs and arms. They are very expressive, evoking something between human and animal.

One piece starts with a projected grid with one animated character inside each square. The viewer can then manipulate this initial formation with the aid of a button, by turning a knob or by starting a timer. Each of the six pieces has a different tool with which the viewer can change the figures on the screen, and all produce different results.

The piece "Erect" (2009) starts with thousands of animated figures forming a massive, precariously wobbling, tower-like pile, which is projected into a simple, round area of light. Underneath the projection is a small metal knob which, when turned, causes the tower made out of the figures to collapse. The figures then turn around like socks in a dryer as the knob is continually turned by the viewer.

This collapse of the tower formation is not just caused by the viewer's turning of the knob. After watching the projection for a while, it becomes clear that the wobbling tower formation made by the figures continuously collapses after a period of time. Despite the repeated collapses, the figures ceaselessly reform the same wobbling tower shape — only to fall once again.

This cycle is thus affected by two factors: the interference of an external stimulus (turning the knob) and the small figures' own ceaseless efforts and failures. Knep makes a strong statement about the things humans strive to build and create, but which inevitably are destroyed by an outside force or simply fall to the passage of time. Perhaps more disturbing is the implication that man will be the cause of the destruction of his own creations.

Another piece, entitled "Embark," depicts a similarly fruitless scenario. This time, the projection of light is set up in two parallel, vertical test tube shapes. One of the test tubes is crowded with tiny drawn figures, all struggling and

bumping around the shape of the projected light, while the other is more sparsely populated but with the same attempts at escape by the figures inside it. By holding down one of two blue buttons next to each projection, a bubble of light is formed, and a number of the small figures flock into it. This bubble then travels across the dark space in between the two projections, melds with the other projection and releases the animated figures into the other test tube.

Pressing either button results in an ongoing migration of animated forms from one test tube to the next. But once an animated figure has reached the other side, its struggle to escape does not stop. Like the animated figures in “Erect,” the figures seem to be motivated by a ceaseless, irrational force that makes them set on one goal only — movement — with no regard for the result. “Embark” questions the purpose of the human desire for movement: Is it just a longing for change? Are there any plans for our movements? Or are they just a way to leave behind a situation we have created for ourselves and will create again in a new location? Again, Knep brings up heavy questions in a whimsical manner.

“Exempla” is a disarmingly entertaining exhibit that forces us to examine our own ceaseless habits, the patterns we repeat without thought every day. What are the forces that drive us? Do we even think about what is behind our actions, or do we, like the animations in “Erect” and “Embark,” merely respond to stimuli?