Catalogue essay for the exhibition Still Bytes by Ian Williams

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2D, or not 2D?

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That is the question in Ian Williams' artwork. Williams has focused on using paint to explore the metaphysics of computer games for several years. In his recent body of work, there is substantial development in both his knowledge of the technology of computer games and his deployment of the discipline of painting as a research tool. Overall, this exhibition marks his arrival at a frontier between the two, fine art and computer games, that is among the more exciting in this nascent field.

In these paintings, through arduous, labor intensive processes, Williams methodically breaks down the aesthetic inner logic of the computer-game-playing experience. He extracts information that is ordinarily visible only instant-by-instant, and then reconstructs the 'objects' of the game world, in the form of a still life oil painting. This forestalls the relay of endorphins instigated by contemporary computer games. It refracts the game's hypothetical projections into a form that is still illusory but which is handcrafted, mediated, still.

This recalls the work of modernist painters who went into the steel factories to paint engineers on the foundry floor in the nineteenth century. One such painting is *The Iron Rolling Mill (Modern Cyclopes)* by Adolph Menzel (1872). There is a return to this approach to painting in Williams' work. He too, investigates the processes of the production of things. Williams also seems to be on the foundry floor, himself, intellectually at least, in the process of the production of a coherent image of the virtual foundry of these mysterious mechanics.

His procedure allows him to leave behind the content of the game and foreground the work of the 'physics engine'. This is essentially an algorithm designed by a computer programmer, or team of computer programmers, whose role in the game is like that of the Wizard in the Wizard of Oz. They make 'things' in the game look like they exist. The algorithm makes an object in the game *appear* to have a 'surface', to obey gravity and more broadly to interact in a Newtonian manner, like things in our world. Put simply, the paintings result from investigating how a computer game makes a 2 dimensional surface appear to have 3 dimensions—but Williams then problematizes it. In their painted form, Williams sheers off the 'surfaces' and troubles the gravity and Newtonian physics of the algorithm to reveal the 'objects' are in fact unified: all are in fact equivalent, slippery and mutable.

These paintings pose the question: What is a thing in a computer game? Despite mastering the painting of the sweet yet acidic light of pixels with oil paint, Williams does not 'shed light' on this question. This is deliberate. At this point one must press pause and reflect. >start< … >start< Perhaps the most exciting aspect of this body of work is that Williams does not give us an answer. We are not presented with a derivative form of subjective reportage. There is no moral lesson on the perils of technology, delivered via pastiche or pop collage. Like a computer game perhaps, these paintings at first appear disturbingly silent, until it becomes clear. The paintings are open. They are playable, like their subject matter.