

EXHIBITIONS

By **Travis Diehl**

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Ed Atkins, Gladstone Gallery, New York

Ed Atkins at Gladstone Gallery

In New York, Atkins's new videos magic away the fourth wall between art and audience and manifest the grotesqueries of getting too close.

Ed Atkins (*1982) is a virtuoso of the extreme closeup and, as a result, of the leaking mortality only visible at a distance usually reserved for lovers, doctors, and murderers. Rather than "real" people, the artist usually accomplishes these studies at the remove of hyperdetailed (if unrealistic) 3D models. His characters booze and smoke, emit tears and snot, playing on the fact that, unlike flesh-and-blood beings with rich inner worlds (and organs), 3D models are all surface.

Atkins's latest video, *Pianowork 2* (2023), adds a new conceit: This time, Atkins has modeled himself. The avatar we watch noodling at an upright piano is based on exacting scans of the artist's own body, down to his hairline, stubble, and earring. The animation was motion-captured by the artist, too: a performance of an eponymous piece of music by Swiss experimental composer Jürg Frey. The maudlin, irregular recital consists mostly of drifting dyads, the model's fingers striking the keys using mostly one hand, two fingers at a time, with subtle attention to the attack, as the creak of the sustain pedal resonates in the instrument. But more than that, you hear Atkins himself – his nasal breaths, the wet clicks of his mouth. The camera explores his furrowed forehead, his individual salt-and-pepper hairs and keyboard-white teeth, or the humble scuffs on his dress shoes, at a closeness, it's worth underscoring, never allowed to concert audiences.

CGI makes it possible to transgress personal space. The composer Ryuichi Sakamoto's final "concert" achieved a similar effect: Sakamoto motion-captured himself performing solo piano music, which was assembled into a VR performance. The headsetted audience could approach the musician at his bench, watch his hands on the keys, the moods flicker across his face. The experience is ghostly – especially since Sakamoto died before the premiere – but there's an elegiac pall to Atkins's performance, too.

(The credits say he performed the piece "in great sadness.") At the composition's climax, Atkins stops noodling and resolves to strike steady quarter notes on the same major fourth; he keeps the dyad going for two entire minutes, and as the music's monotony builds, his 3D mask contorts with pain or concentration; when he releases the tension with a major fifth, he audibly releases his breath, his body letting go. A degree of artifice heightens the grotesqueness of these closeups. The longest work in the show is a 2022 film adaptation of *Sorcerer*, a play Atkins co-wrote with the poet Steven Zultanski. It shows, in real time, eighty minutes in the life of a man who, coincidentally or not, resembles a cross between Atkins and a dog-eyed Elon Musk. The set is a European apartment on a wall-less soundstage. Pipes, radiators, and cabinetry mark its edges. The action starts as he and two friends walk through the door, sit down with their Carlsbergs, and begin discussing their respective methods of undressing. Their conversation is musing and superficial, witty but low-stakes – until the conversation turns to the surgery that one of the women has recently undergone and her fear of general anesthesia. The man has a coughing fit; then, his two friends say goodnight, as if touching on their inner lives, meaning both their personal motivations (beyond preferences and habits) and their bodily frailty, has soured the evening. But the play, relentless, is only roughly halfway through: We proceed to watch and hear the man putter around his flat, doing strange breath-holding exercises, taking out the garbage, and sucking down leftover noodles. When the talking stops, we're left to wonder: What's going on in his head?

Then, any pretense of pretense breaks: The man sits down at a kind of dressing table, his back to the house, while a camera beams an extreme closeup of his face to a large screen above his head. Beginning by popping out one eye, then the other, he performs a grotesque, slobbering, cracking pantomime of removing his face, feature by feature, and laying the wriggling pieces on the table. While this winking breach of the "fourth wall" deserves an eye roll, breaking off your nose and teeth isn't such a rare fantasy. I found myself flipping between the mundane sadness of the character the actor portrayed and that of the actor himself, imagining he's lived many such nights. What Atkins and Zultanski offer isn't magic, but an extreme closeup of the gory minutia of an unremarkable evening. The play flouts the rule that staged lives should be more meaningful than our own. Here, even the fantasies are as irrefutable as a body come apart.

Ed Atkins

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