

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Danielle Wu, "Confronting Our Existential Dilemmas in a Live-Simulated Fantasy World,"  
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## HYPERALLERGIC

### Confronting Our Existential Dilemmas in a Live-Simulated Fantasy World

For *Emissaries*, Ian Cheng designed three self-playing video games that take place on a fictitious volcanic island.



*Emissaries*, installation view (all images by the author for Hyperallergic)

What empathetic connections can be found in virtual reality, as a new realm to exercise the imagination? This was the primary question I found posed when viewing Ian Cheng's entrancing solo exhibition *Emissaries* at MoMA PS1.

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For this exhibition, Cheng designed three live simulations, or self-playing video games, that take place on a fictitious volcanic island. There are three “chapters,” each a different era in the island’s history, that each occupy a different screen in the galleries. The nature of live simulation means that the characters who populate the island control themselves in real time, as opposed to a prerecording that would play on loop. Chapter 1, “Emissary in the Squat of Gods,” represents humanity’s prehistoric past and features cartoonish figures tinkering around in a barren white landscape inspired by volcanos in Southeast Asia, where ash provides fertile soil for new life to spawn. When I viewed the work, a few characters were huddled so tightly around a fire that some were actually standing inside of it. In this new world, the fire didn’t seem to burn. In Chapter 2 “Emissary Forks at Perfection,” Shiba Inu dogs dominate the island, which is now lush with tropical greenery, occasionally uprooting a shrub or doing what can only be described as derping.



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While the notion of artificial intelligence feels novel and intrepid, complete autonomy is only an illusion in this live simulation. Instead of scripting entire scenes, Cheng embedded characters with motivations and personalities that guide their actions. Chapter 3, “Emissary Sun Sets the Self,” features plant-like organisms in conflict with a meerkat-like species. In a talk at MoMA PS1 with Chief Curator of the Department of Media and Performance Art Stuart Comer, Cheng demonstrated how the meerkats are programmed with an intense fear of difference, so they will eradicate any mutation of other species they encounter. They are also equipped with the ability to hit, harass, or otherwise act aggressively toward the mysterious, faceless “other.” Although Chapter 3 is set in a hypothetical distant future, I found it quite relatable to our own political reality. Unlike the relative lightheartedness of earlier chapters, this one takes on a darker tone with the introduction of tenacity, violence, and hatred. I watched a meerkat break off a section of a wriggling tubular plant, then drag it across the screen. A neighboring plant inched upward, limbs ablaze but otherwise unharmed, leaving me to wonder how witnessing this kind of violence with no repercussions increases our already rampant lack of human empathy.

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Meanwhile, as spectators, our own safety and accountability is never imperiled. Most of the time, the camera hovers above the action, privileging the viewer as an omnipotent being with a high vantage point. When the point-of-view shifted to someone on the ground, especially a creature in the middle of a traumatic fight, even Cheng himself admitted that it was “nauseating” to watch. But generally, the viewer is sheltered and isn’t encouraged to feel pain. We are comforted by our position behind the screen, which offers the protection level of bulletproof glass.

At first glance, *Emissaries* comes close to the utopian dream proposed by technofeminist Donna Haraway in her essay “Cyborg Manifesto,” where she predicts that cybernetic organisms will eventually dissolve the social

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categories of race, sex, and class, erasing the long and painful human history of colonialism and imperialism. For the most part, Cheng avoids explicitly gendering or racializing his near-sentient beings in a way that is immediately reminiscent of human hierarchies, which makes us feel at ease that he has toiled around with them. After all, the perversity of our current coexistence with technology doesn't exactly stem from enslaving bots to do our dirty work but emerges from patriarchal efforts to humanize them, as exemplified by Siriand Alexa, technologies that reveal that the ideal subservient figure is still a woman. However, Chapters 2 and 3 disguise old stories with new faces. In Chapter 2, all humans have been eradicated except for one, who is controlled by dogs. Some might find this paradox humorous or entertaining, but we are not prompted to consider the ethics of being entertained by this hypothetical situation.



*Emissaries*, installation view

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Cheng's formulation of his fantasy world, particularly in Chapter 3, often recreates interspecies antagonism and subjugation for spectacle that does not subvert our current reality as a society desensitized to watching violence on screens. It contrasts, for example, multimedia artist Sondra Perry's use of A.I. in her recent exhibition *Resident Evil* to actively question why agents in power refuse to relinquish control over narratives, gazes, or destructive tendencies. On a panel with Cheng, Perry asserted, "The radical potential of A.I. is ... the ability to refuse the idea of a human intelligence that is a static idea of what intellect is ... using that to make available a different way of being." Although Cheng's digital creations toy with the idea of transferring power from the creator to the created, they do not quite break the fourth wall or build new relationships between viewers and moving images.

Many critics have taken Cheng's articulations of the future at face value, but it is a misconception that the live simulations represent an alternate reality. For example, Ed Halter in 4 Columns applies the quandaries about rising consciousness to the distant future. In fact, there can be parallels drawn to our present turmoil and unease toward historically oppressed bodies who are conscious of their systemic oppression. In recent sci-fi fantasies *Ex Machina* and *Westworld*, female robots who are created by male protagonists with little regard for their humanity or possible independence serve as metaphors for liberation movements.

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*Emissaries, installation view*

Without being given much context, it's difficult to have a sense of how much time has passed between the three *Emissaries* chapters, or where we stand in the timeline of events. But Cheng presents abstractions of a world that is in fact not very different from our own — a fantastical, well-orchestrated drama of our own flailing, undirected, cannibalistic bodies and existential dilemmas.

*Emissaries* continues at MoMA PS1 (22-25 Jackson Ave, Long Island City) through September 25. The works livestream on *Twitch*.