

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Emily Watlington, "Ed Atkins's new work shows that his real medium might be poetry," *Art in America*, January 8, 2020

Art in America

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ED ATKINS'S NEW WORK SHOWS THAT HIS REAL MEDIUM MIGHT BE POETRY



View of Ed Atkins's exhibition "I like spit now," 2019, at Gavin Brown's enterprise.

After seeing some gripping performative poetry readings by Ed Atkins, I walked into "I like spit now," his latest exhibition at Gavin Brown's enterprise, hoping to see something other than the CGI works for which he is best known. While Atkins's videos play with the dissonance between the very human scenes they depict and their hyperreal computerized rendering, their most striking elements are the monologues he crafts for his melancholy computer-generated male protagonists. Most art that employs cutting-edge technology is ultimately about the medium alone, leaving little behind when that medium inevitably becomes obsolete. But strip away the CGI from Atkins's works and we're still left with poetry—which might, in fact, be Atkins's real medium.



Ed Atkins: *Refuse*, 2019, two-channel realtime 3D simulation; at Gavin Brown's enterprise.

I was surprised to find my wish come true, to a degree. CGI did feature prominently in the exhibition, which was spread across three floors of the gallery's Harlem building, but the show also foregrounded writing in ways I hadn't imagined, presenting fragments of text by Atkins and others using unexpected mediums. The exhibition opened with works from his new series "Refuse" (2019), including laser-cut engravings of text—a poem, a recipe, and an index—on giant nonperishable crackers that hung on the walls, interspersed among cartoonish gouache drawings of hands and feet. On the gallery's top floor was another group of works from the series: stained tablecloths, mounted on foam panels, that had been embroidered with nursery rhymes, a poem by the tenth-century Japanese writer Sei Shōnagon, a list by Isaac Newton of all his sins, and a list of baby names Atkins drafted before the birth of his daughter.

The centerpiece of the series is a new CGI video, *Refuse*, whose two channels were divided between floors. On the gallery's top floor, a tall vertical projection displayed a generative simulation of various objects—among them, tires, a ladder, a piano, and flat-screen TVs—dropping from the sky amid falling rain and snow. On the ground floor, the other projection displayed the same objects crashing to the ground, forming a growing pile of snow-covered trash. The work employs AI that makes the objects fall differently each time the video loops. CGI is typically used to produce fantastical scenes, like singing snowmen, that defy the limiting, depressing, and banal aspects of reality. Here, by contrast, it is harnessed to explore more realistic hypotheses, such as those examined in crash-test simulations, which translate principles of physics from equations to observable scenarios.



View of Ed Atkins's exhibition "I like spit now," 2019, at Gavin Brown's enterprise.

On the second floor, sandwiched between the two parts of *Refuse*, was Atkins's installation *Old Food* (2017–19), comprising a rack of suits at the center of the room, draped in plastic as if at a dry cleaner's, surrounded by nine synchronized CGI videos featuring enigmatic renderings of crying male figures, piano players, and grotesque food. None of the characters speak. Instead, sheets of plywood and metal engraved with dry, didactic interpretations of Atkins's work written by the anonymous bloggers on the website *Contemporary Art Writing Daily* accompany the videos.

The omnipresence of screens today tends to produce experiences of dissociation, in which the hypnotic allure of bright computer monitors or game consoles overrides our physical needs—for rest, for food. But Atkins likes *spit now*: slobbery stains on tablecloths, the stuff you might notice in your mouth while reading his poems on crackers or watching his seductive video of the elements of a burger slowly falling on top of each other. While Atkins has long probed if and how human bodily needs and emotions figure in the digital sphere, this exhibition saw him pushing his work more emphatically into meatspace.