

Quake



Quake

Installation view

There are three primary elements in the work – the constantly mutating figures who emerge from the landscape and walk towards the viewer, only to disappear beyond the bounds of the frame; the shifting and transmuting ‘sand’ which is almost the base element of the piece, and the rising and falling cityscapes of the background, creating themselves from the primordius, only to collapse back into it. Could you talk about each of these elements, and the relations between them?

In one sense, the piece as a whole is a reflection on contemporary geopolitics, especially about the world existing in an apocalyptic mode. Quake encapsulates that moment of absolute tumult that is so pivotal to the countless narratives that present the creation of the world, or its final annihilation, handed on from ancient mythologies all the way through to contemporary popular science fiction and on into the portrayals and posturings of global news. However, I wanted to retain the original sense of apocalypse as a ‘lifting of the veil’ - a discourse of revelation. And for such a discourse to hold all the monumental contingencies of origination and decimation, it has to, somewhere within its folds, harbour some indefinable, incalculable excess - the potential to yield perilous spills of multiple, intersecting planes of meaning. It is in this multi-layeredness that, to me, the three elements in Quake are bound together as equal parts of the same narrative.

With regard to the different elements, they each seem to feed into, and out of the other two. The restless, autophagic architecture of the city on the horizon seems to produce, yet also to compose itself out of, the vast granular field of corrosive energy, which in turn yields the figures, growing from miniscule foetal bundles that bud in the distance at random intervals in terms of time and position. These figures proceed from so far in the background that when they finally do approach us as distinct entities, the sense of it is that they’ve always been there. So they’re brand new and ancient at the same time, and they also seem, in their very rapid mutations, to carry some seed of what is happening behind them in that impossible metropolis that is simultaneously all cities and no city, and reads in a way as ‘all civilization’. Likewise, in that they each manifest a flicker of different faces and bodies, the figures seem with each passing frame of video to forget who they were before and assume a new identity, so they come to represent everyone and no-one at the

same time – and in that, all humanity.

What’s the significance then of all the figures being women?

A key aspect of my work is that of my performative presence in it – a playing out of ideas into a sense of private gesture, something untranslatable. In this way, creative intent becomes inextricably bound with who I am: therefore, what I communicate will always also speak of being a woman. In Quake, all of the figures are me, since I provide the template figure, but they are also just human figures who happen to be female, who exhibit an impulse for relentless self-renewal within the apocalyptic world of the piece. The montages for the figures are made up of a wide range of images, taken mainly from the web. This was important, because as a data source, in many respects the internet represents that excess of signification that seems at any given point of intersection to be capable of producing anything – anything at all – to the point of obliterating any discernible, static identity or point of view. The images show female bodies and faces from every possible human predicament or exuberance, of every age, culture or location. Portraits of flesh as well as stone, wood, marble: venerated, celebrated, injured or degraded. There are middle-aged bloggers, sport stars, felons, politicians, refugees, celebrities, teenage wannabe’s, Viking and Roman and Hindu goddesses, anonymous porn actresses, nomads and grandmothers and trauma victims, even other artists. There are 25 images per second* flickering in the advancing silhouettes, too fast to register as individuals, so they register collectively as a symbol of something more.

It is this ‘more’ that interests me. The very same desire to ‘show all’ – to encompass every diversity, all states of being, every expression of human and female knowledge – results in an act of encryption, which brings with it a certain menace. It’s as though Quake, in presenting all moments at once and yet, in its seamless looping the very opposite of linear time, sits at the edge of a radical fissure in the very fabric of what can be known, remembered or experienced. That is why the idea of the veiled figure has also appealed to me: in the apocalyptic sense that sees great things, whole worlds, or, that which constitutes the infinite ‘more’, being revealed. The figures might be refugees, but they may also be interpreted as emissaries sent out to meet us with an important message – over and over again.

There is a cyclical element to the looped nature of the piece too...

The city decays into the ground and bleeds into the sand – nourishing the desert with the dark mass of its ruins. Its destruction is thus also constitutive of the landscape; a cyclical pattern which mirrors that of nature. The circle is characteristic of non-historical, or ‘primitivist’ cultures, including nomadic ones. Circular rites and incantations are used to perform magic of many varieties. On the other hand, the square characterizes cities and technological cultures – many cities were planned according to a grid system. ‘Squaring the circle’ as an ancient problem in geometry that has metaphoric echoes in systems of occult knowledge. Such interplays exist in *Quake* as well, with the visual space being organised in a roughly linear, perspective-conscious way, while the time aspect privileges circularity.

Which leaves the final element of the ‘sand’?

A: For all its obvious references to ‘desert’, there is no solid surface or ‘earth’ in *Quake*. The figures advance toward the viewer on different levels, which throws strict perspective out of joint and creates an uncertain, slightly hallucinatory landscape. I imagined looking into a vast sphere constituted of innumerable, chaotic particles that react to forces beyond our grasp. Now and then great dark waves pass through this field – something that I thought of as a subterranean storm, but of course the consciousness of its resemblance to oil was also there. Immediately then, references accrue around how contemporary geopolitics are about the consumption of that resource, and, more ‘fundamentally’, around the potentially apocalyptic global conflict of economics, ideology and religion. The sand also functions as a base element in the piece, as ‘white noise’. In effect all of the elements of the piece devolve into streams of electronic information – it is a video work, after all.

Thus there’s the idea of white noise as a field of possibility, out of which instantiations emerge, just as the cities rise and fall, and the sand shifts, and the figures constantly move towards and then beyond the viewer?

Yes. I used to dream, as a child, of a comforting white space which gradually filled up with pixels of televisual white noise, which I would then decompose, bit by bit. The idea in the piece is that it is not possible to access all knowledge, all systems in human experience.

As these cities rise and fall, as the wandering figures leave the viewer behind, we worry about what is forgotten – just as there is an ever-shortening cycle for what we get nostalgic about in popular culture. There’s that sense of longing in the work, that we are all nomads who can only grasp a handful of sand, with the knowledge and information that it contains, yet must accept that there can never be one signal to this noise. There’s an ambiguity to the sand field, a ‘static’ field that is never static, but is full of highly charged electric particles. This is really what narrativizes the fourth dimension of the piece – its comment on temporality. Just as all narrative is an excavation of temporality out of the possible sands of meaning, so the figures in the piece are composed of cut-ups of various montaged figures, forced into meaning as though in a game of exquisite corpse. There’s one final element you haven’t mentioned – that of the soundtrack. This is intended to be reminiscent of disembodied voices, carried away by the wind whipping through the desert, like sonic semiotic ghosts who dwell on the far limits of some great, invisible metropolis.

Finally, what’s the significance of the title?

It relates to change, all the changes that determine our outlook on the world and our visions for the future – whether these are big or small changes, they form the grand mosaic of shared destinies. An earthquake causes the earth to ripple and tear, but there are small quakes too, in each individual life, that cause contingencies and decisions. These small moments may only be discerned in retrospect, but at such moments all knowledge is potentially there, and passes through us. What we see as the violent consequences of a quake is not the quake itself – it is always elsewhere, an invisible building up of tectonic energy that is laden with an uncanny residue of will and brooding intent.

* The standard PAL video format, as opposed to NTSC used in the USA, which uses 30 images per second.

James Sey is a Johannesburg-based writer, theorist and art critic. He contributes regularly to South Africa’s premier art publication, *Art South Africa*, amongst others.

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Brief artist's statement

Quake is a reflection on contemporary geopolitics, in particular about the world existing in an apocalyptic mode. Besides the narratives of tumult handed on from ancient mythologies through to contemporary popular science fiction to the portrayals and posturings of global news, I wanted to retain the original sense of apocalypse as a 'lifting of the veil' - a discourse of revelation. And for such a discourse to hold all the monumental contingencies of origination and decimation, it has to harbour some indefinable, incalculable excess - the potential to yield perilous spills of multiple, intersecting planes of meaning.

In Quake, three elements feed into, and out of each other. The restless, autophagic architecture of the city on the horizon seems to produce, yet also to compose itself out of, the vast granular field of corrosive energy, which in turn yields the figures, growing from miniscule foetal bundles that bud in the distance at random intervals. These fugitive envoys proceed from so far in the background that when they finally do approach us as distinct entities, the sense of it is that they've always been there. So they're brand new and ancient at the same time, and they also seem, in their very rapid mutations, to carry some seed of what is happening behind them in that impossible metropolis

that is simultaneously all cities and no city, and reads in a way as 'all civilization'. Likewise, in that they each manifest a flicker of different faces and bodies, the figures seem with each passing frame of video to forget who they were before and assume a new identity, so they come to represent everyone and no-one at the same time - and in that, all humanity.

The visual dynamics in Quake suggest that it is not possible to encompass the entire archive of human experience. As these cities rise and fall and the subterranean storms roil, the wandering figures leave the viewer behind, and we worry about what is forgotten. There's that sense of longing in the work: that we are all nomads who can only grasp a handful of sand, with the knowledge and information that it contains, yet must accept that there can never be only one signal to this noise. It's as though Quake, in evoking all moments at once and yet, in its seamless looping offers the very opposite of linear time, sits at the edge of a radical fissure in the very fabric of what can be known, remembered or experienced.

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Quake | 2007 | DVD | Single-Channel Video Installation

Duration: Video 3 mins, Stereo Audio 6mins 23secs, looped



QUAKE

2007

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