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Quan Wenfei's Digital Nostalgia and the Internet of Our Childhood



Remember when the internet used to be fun? Not long ago, this digital playground was still a nascent and wild landscape where middle school children would learn HTML just to play their favorite songs on their MySpace page. Or what about when time spent with a computer was relegated to offline desktop games because being connected to the internet meant no one else could use the house phone? Truly, there is something undeniably tender and idyllic about that bygone era where talk of the internet inspired exciting possibilities and novel horizons for humankind, rather than a looming fear of sci-fi-esque, chimeric AGI singularity. For many, the continual gloom of

today's internet, with the overabundance of data, algorithmic doom, and the *Minority Report*-style surveillance that has taken place using that same data, incites both fear and the nostalgia for simpler times.

Quan Wenfei's first solo show at Eli Klein, *Internet Archaeology*, attempts to draw on the artist's personal experience and childhood memories to offer a style of archival practice in our digital world. Spanning across 12 works from her series *CAPTCHA*, *Click and Win!*, *Tetris*, and a selection of installations, this recent Columbia MFA graduate's exhibition demonstrates her broad scope of research and a keen insight into our digital history.



In her *Tetris* series, which consists of sets of large-scale, tetris-like shaped canvases, the interlocking modules have a seemingly endless possibility for assemblage. In one iteration, *Tetris Remix 1* takes the form of a metallic heart, which evokes a cutesy, pre-

emoji era when the excitement of form was made possible by new graphics chips. Like the satisfying sensation of the original game, when the pieces fall into the right places, here, the rounded segments offer a similar satisfaction in how neatly they connect to each other. The metallic paint feeds into that machinic feel without pushing too much toward Terminator grunge.



Standing on its own, *I Am Not A Robot* is a keyboard that sits on a platform desk, mechanically typing out the sentence “I am not a robot,” over and over. Visibly unplugged from a wall or socket, the self-typing of the keyboard is meant to invite the irony of a self-performing machine denying its robotic appellation. The typing is set on

a timer, allowing for a certain predictability of the clickety clack of the keys, drawing attention in every impression. Though one cannot touch the keyboard, the absent fingers remind the eyes of a tactility ever further deemphasized by flat digital screens. Sure, there may be long-winded elaborations on the model of the keyboard, its evidently retro design, and why its off-white plastic body reminds us of the analog machine, but one need not look hard to understand the desired effect; an outdated, non-thinking machine playing the role of automaton. Quirky? Yes. Gimmicky? Hardly. The piece is both simple and effective.



In the back corner hangs a pair of mustard yellow gloves titled *Duodecimal Glove*, which has red, vein-like lines painted on top. With almost the same cyberpunk appeal as a pair of red gloves from Katsuhiro Otomo's now beloved 1988 *Akira*. From afar, the gloves don't seem to draw much attention or are any cause for suspicion. Look closely, however, and you'll notice that there is an extra set of thumbs. Similar to many AI-generated images, which should not be looked upon with too much scrutiny, here, the extra digits on the gloves are a reminder to verify the things that seem to go unnoticed.



For the *Click and Win!* series, Quan uses large multilayered silkscreen prints on canvas to hark back to those endless hours of Microsoft's *Solitaire*. Using different pastel-colored backgrounds, the pieces immediately recall the moments when one wins a game and all the cards are shuffled outward, or when an unfortunate player must suffer the anguish of a frozen computer screen and the cards are stuck in muted duplication. In this show, the prints produce less anxiety than they do in gesturing that silent joy in what is already too familiar.



With *CAPTCHA*, it is evident that Quan is playing with the visibility of the invisible. The blurred images conjure that nebulous zone of ownership and recognizability, where the function of the image supersedes the content of the images themselves. Printed large enough for the pixels to be perceivable, the crossed-out digital eyes at the

center insist on these images as a walled garden where clarity and meaning are sectioned off by internal logic and rationality. This series recalls the shared experience of having to prove one's own humanity to a machine, which does not always register what it sees, but is always counterintuitively situated as the arbiter of what is acceptable as "human."

In *Dream*, Quan's sleeping face with snails all over them is printed on blue foam and laid bare, reclining against the wall. Simultaneously image and object, it compels one to think of those mid-2000s anti-marijuana PSAs, [where smokers become deflated human sacks](#). Like elsewhere in the show, here, the human seems trapped in the digital world in a dreamlike torpor. The result is contemplative, playful, and not overly serious.

Taken together, Quan's interdisciplinary and multimedia investigation in *Internet Archaeology* draws from childhood memory and her personal engagement with technology. The intentional whimsy here ties the tangible together with the digital. Quan brings out a fun retro-millennial sensibility that stems from the perspective of a generation that grew up witnessing a rapid chain of technological succession. And while there is certainly room for more pieces, the show feels tastefully complete and leaves a lasting impression.

Quan Wenfei: *Internet Archaeology* is on view from September 13 to November 29, 2025.

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