

David Geers, “Pieter Schoolwerth’s Sims 4 Paintings Burst Our Filter Bubbles,” *Frieze*, October 2, 2020.

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Pieter Schoolwerth’s Sims 4 Paintings Burst Our Filter Bubbles

At Petzel Gallery, New York, the artist presents a suite of paintings inspired by the life-simulation game

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BY DAVID GEERS IN REVIEWS | 02 OCT 20



The pandemic may have made masks key to our social navigation – turning them into crucial prophylactics, unlikely political semaphores, and bold fashion statements – but we were already masking ourselves long before. Log onto Instagram, Twitter or TikTok and you’ll see an abundance of proxies and avatars performing a playful, if not sinister, masquerade. For Pieter Schoolwerth, this form of interaction has been a sustained concern, which he has catalogued in optically intricate and conceptually rich works that hybridize painting, sculpture and digital practices.

For ‘Shifted Sims’, his debut exhibition at Petzel Gallery, Schoolwerth draws on the popular life-simulation computer game *The Sims 4* (2014), fusing slick inkjet printing, furrowed impasto and expressionist handling in paintings that chart a tour of the game’s simulacra, where players shop, farm, pursue careers, engage in sexual acts or take selfies of their virtual doppelgängers. Each formally fractured tableau – picture cubism meets *Toy Story* (1995) – renders a thinly veiled allegory of our own increasingly distanced reality. In *Shifted Sims #9 (Eco Lifestyle)* (all works 2020), these surrogates enjoy an ergonomic, eco-friendly house and communicate in emojis – our new pictographic shorthand. In *Shifted Sims #14 (Luxury Party Stuff)* they socialize and dine. Meanwhile, *Shifted Sims #17 (Wicked WooHoo Sex Mod)*, in which a male avatar joyfully receives fellatio as a green elf watches and an anime fox joins in the frolic, could almost be an orgy from *Star Trek: The Next Generation’s* (1987–94) holodeck.

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Pieter Schoolwerth, *Shifted Sims #14 (Luxury Party Stuff)*, 2020, oil, acrylic, inkjet on canvas, 2 × 2.8 m. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York

Extending Schoolwerth’s process from his ‘Model as Painting’ series (2016–19) – a play on Yve-Alain Bois’s influential tome *Painting as Model* (1990) – each canvas follows a complex transformation, beginning with a sculptural relief that the artist laboriously crafts by hand out of foam board, in a gesture highlighting the gritty underpinnings of today’s airy promises of seamless cloud-based connectivity. This infrastructure is then photographed, printed and worked over with lustrous paint. But the fit of this sheath is never seamless: rather, it is shifted to double the figures, but also to expose the gaps that impede our fusion with digital technologies, revealing the fault lines that separate avatar from anonymized actor, pixel from flesh.

Countering much recent figuration that proffers the human likeness as a kind of organic guarantee, the body in these works disappears, too, morphing into shadows and voids – much as our own bodies are sublimated and dislocated via so many online echoes. But, in this transition, paint gains a new agency: in *Shifted Sims #11 (Into the Future PlantSim Challenge)*, it roams in weaving tracks within sharply delineated silhouettes; in *Shifted Sims #7 (Fashionista Career)*, it splinters the portrait, peeling in impasto skins and recasting expressionism’s perceived sincerity as just one code among many – another game asset or photo filter to toggle through.

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Pieter Schoolwerth, *Shifted Sims* #17 (*Wicked WooHoo Sex Mod*), 2020, oil, acrylic, inkjet on canvas, 2.7 × 2.2 m. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York

For Schoolwerth, this game and match of painting, to paraphrase Bois, is urgent to sustain even in today’s Zoom-scarred landscape, where both body and art are mediated and fractured by the screen. In this labyrinth, Schoolwerth’s *oeuvre*, with its various assaults on image, the figure and painting’s cherished atavisms (like medium-specificity and the notion of a centred, expressive self), demonstrates a dogged commitment to updating the discipline in order to confront our seemingly endless string of crises. How we define these – technological, ecological, ideological – is, like the cypher of the mask itself, a question of positioning and, now, a matter of which filter bubble we call home. Schoolwerth suggests that the answer also lies within the heart of representation and its digitally exacerbated cracks – that is, somewhere between wishful thinking and the frail human matter behind it.

Pieter Schoolwerth, ‘Shifted Sims’, runs at Petzel Gallery, New York until 31 October 2020.

Main Image: Pieter Schoolwerth, *Shifted Sims* #9 (*Eco Lifestyle*), 2020, oil, acrylic, inkjet on canvas, 1.8 × 2.8 m. Courtesy: the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York

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