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Days of Endless Time

One cold and bright Sunday in early spring, I left my house in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Washington, DC, and walked to the National Mall. My destination was *Days of Endless Time*, an exhibition of video installations at the Hirshhorn Museum. The 14 works on display—to quote the program—“emphasize slower, more meditative forms of perception.”

The first work that visitors encounter is Su-Mei Tse’s *L’Echo* (2003). A wall-sized projection shows a woman, Tse herself, dressed in red and playing a cello with her back to the viewer. She’s dwarfed by the sheer dark gray face of a distant cliff and by the expanse of bright green grass on which her stool rests. For the five minutes of the video, we hear the slow contemplative music that she plays echoed by the cliff that dominates the frame.

Despite its power to evoke both awe and tranquility, *L’Echo* was surpassed in impact by two works that relied heavily on computational image processing. *Afterimage* (2013) by Clemens von Wedemeyer consists of a large semicircular screen displaying what seems at first to be a video tour of a warehouse crammed with movie props. As the six-minute video plays out, the camera pans over the closely packed statues of Roman emperors, busts of medieval popes, and so on. But the camera also appears to pass through walls that dissolve as a new room is entered. Some of the props move.

At 12 minutes, David Claerbout’s *Travel* (1996–2013) was the longest work in the exhibition. According to the caption,

the artist spent years animating archetypes from nature, both sublime and quotidian, to produce a slow, solitary journey through an imaginary landscape. *Travel* incorporates painterly precision and a synthesis of “therapeutic music,” and was inspired by vistas in France, Luxembourg, and Belgium. Evoking everywhere and nowhere, the work presents a wealth of visual detail as it conforms to well-worn imagery of the forest, jungle, and suburbs.

The effect of *Travel* is both mesmerizing and eerie. The foliage is rendered with near photographic accuracy, yet even the lightest leaves remain utterly still. And the camera—or, rather, the virtual camera—moves among the trees at the height of a toddler and with perfectly smooth tracking. No insects, birds, or other animals are present—just plants.

Video games, whose computer-animated worlds are increasingly intricate and convincing, might seem the diametric opposite of the works in *Days of Endless Time*, both in character and purpose. But not all video games are fast-paced, violent romps. Claerbout’s imaginary landscapes reminded me of the scenery in *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, a mystery game for PCs and PlayStation released last year to much critical acclaim.

If a computer-generated video game can be slow and tranquil, then computer-generated art can be fast and exciting. Much as I enjoyed *Days of Endless Time*, I would love to see an exhibition whose works matched the intensity of three other acclaimed video games of 2014: *Titanfall*, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, and *Civilization: Beyond Earth*. ■

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