NU-METAL CAN DECAY: IN CONVERSATION WITH THEODORE DARST

ED STECK   25.10.16

In *THE TOURIST – a bad neighborhood*, a new video by Theodore Darst, transgression is solitude when framed by isolated narrative moments of in-camera time-stamped marked faux-aggression. Pixel-scapes of unintelligibly reduced washes of a near-twenty year old mosh pit de-evolve from obsolescent media to an awkwardly harmonious wave of singularity. *THE TOURIST – a bad neighborhood* is an amalgamation of nu-metal archaeology, an infinite reframing of anti-capitalist gestures, and a filtering process for re-directing both +/- energy into the questionable spaces of digital skin.

As someone who was one Slayer CD away from becoming a Juggalo and frequently wore oversized full-color, full-print Todd McFarlane's Spawn t-shirts in the 1990s, I was intrigued by the cultural moments that dominated much of my adolescent existence found distorted, redefined, and abstracted in Theodore Darst's *THE TOURIST – a bad neighborhood*. I talked to Mr. Darst about the video, which debuts here. Our correspondence is below.

THE TOURIST – a bad neighborhood from Theodore Darst on Vimeo.

What ideas are you confronting, molding, or addressing in your work? How have these questions informed or developed your work?

I think I'm mainly interested in the ways that humans become numb towards reality when it's mediated through technology. The horizontal distribution of images online, whether it's a video of the 9/11 attacks or some immaculate 3D rendering of the construction of an unreal space become equivalent online. I like how these additive and subtractive modes of representation become meaningless.

The Tourist –a bad neighborhood **begins with motifs, moods, and tones associated with horror. The forest is often a setting in horror that is used as a site of entrapment, confusion, or site of violence. What is the specific function of a setting like the forest in this piece?**

When I made *THE TOURIST – a bad neighborhood* I was living alone in a semi dilapidated house in upstate New York and in a really bad place in my personal life. I think the forest symbolized something that had to do with an operatic sense of horror but also a feeling of possibility, not in an entirely positive sense. I liked that it was a place you could go to for purity and peace but also I was attracted to the idea that I could just go there and vanish at any given time.

Is there mistrust in positive energy in your work? There seems to be a correlation with bodies morphing, faces grimacing, and data-severing of limbs whenever positivity or healing is discussed in the dialogue.

I think I mistrust the idea of energy having a positive or negative thrust either way. I feel like startup culture, life hacking, and a lot of the post internet art that sets out to examine or satirize those cultures maintains a belief that some sort of positive energy or simulated nirvana can be achieved through a brain activity or using an app or making an installation. I don't really buy any of that.

When I was making *THE TOURIST – a bad neighborhood* I was thinking a lot about the riots at Woodstock '99 and how it was this sort of pre 9/11 cultural moment where all the negative energy got let out. It's in the dialogue too. Right before he told people to tear down the security towers and burn all the shit down, Fred Durst from Limp Bizkit said he wanted everyone to let the negative energy out. You could really make a case for most energy being negative energy.

There is a lot of modification of skin in this piece – both in the characters, environment, and font textures. Can you speak to this?

Most of the elements in my work stem from presets or characters and various animations I can apply to them that I buy online.

I'm interested in the evolving idea of stock imagery, from the type of flat photographic imagery that might have been used in print ads in the 1980's to the current form of .obj models of fully malleable "humans" that exist in the sculptural space of 3d animation. I think the more raw texturing in my work functions as an intervention of some sort, maybe like a remix, or work from the pictures generation artists.

Is there a focus on the separation of the violence able to be enacted against organic skin and the violence able to be performed against synthetic skin? Again, both in landscape, character, and font? Maybe there isn't a difference between these three things at all?

I think part of what draws me to the use 3D animation goes back to that uncanny valley space where you might feel empathy or physical presence from a flat image that is clearly just a coordinated jumble of pixels. Even the way the characters in *THE TOURIST – a bad neighborhood* move has nothing to do with "real" space. Since it's video not being used as device for documentation, it sort of runs into a funny space where there's actually no possibility for real violence. I think we've become so used to certain signifiers of realness like in camera depth of field, or the light reflected in a lens, that it is easy to accept a flat 3D animated image as having depth or space.

Is there a resistance from synthetic skin?

Probably. I guess that ties back to the violence or the perception of violence enacted on the synthetic/digital body. It's definitely interesting to me that in the majority of the time people invest in an avatar or digital character, they end up putting the body into extreme situations. You rarely see a digital body doing something soft like having a tea party or watching Netflix. Synthetic skin seems to exist in order to test the limits of our concept of the body.

When the dogs appeared, I thought it was representative of Cerebrus, the multi-headed dog that guards the gates of Hades. Then, the infinity symbol, the figure eight, the never-ending crossed loop travels over a highway as the speaker indicates a purgatorial existence of traveling via communication in social media. Is social media a purgatorial communicative highway?

I don't think too much about social media when I'm making work. That symbol in particular came from this bit of footage of my friend Ted Kennedy signing a Square Space iPad where he was just doing this symbol over and over which seemed like this really beautiful, feeble anti-corporate gesture. I think from there I just wanted to see it repeated in space in a different way, which is why I 3D modeled a version of it, I guess.

The dogs in particular just had a really vicious quality to them, they actually drifted in from a different, unrealized project, but I liked the visceral reaction that animation in particular has on viewers for some reason. I think it confuses the space between foreground and background in a strange way.

At one point, the video meditates on low-res slowed footage of the crowd at the infamous Limp Bizkit Woodstock '99 performance. Are the dialogue and the footage an attempt to parse the cult of mythology that is created in media-constructed, or media-informed, forms of identity? Skewing occurs.

A lot of the video stems from an interest in the Woodstock '99 riots. I feel like it wasn't the death of baby boomer rock that anyone wanted, but it was the one they deserved. Like some sort of actually untamable but totally unfashionable punk rock force. I feel contempt for both of those cultures nowadays, including no small amount of self-loathing by someone who was obsessed with nu-metal. So actually, in response to the question, it might be more about mythmaking than any sort of parsing of a cult of mythology. I want to mythologize Fred Durst.

Any closing thoughts?

Yeah. I read a book recently about Benedict Arnold where I learned that when he betrayed America, his most important attack on the 13 Colonies was where he led a British fleet against his hometown of New London, Connecticut and burnt it to the ground. I think my next video will be about that act. It seems very American to burn down the foundations that helped build you up.

Q (/suche)   MENÜ

On UNPAINTED lab 3.0: Theodore Darst – Presenting THE TOURIST - ghost wars - at the UNPAINTED 3.0 - Munich, DE

INTERVIEW (/KUENSTLER/INTERVIEWS)

16.02.2016

RM: Creating life and space through technology – that was what Dan Flavin could have thought when we worked on his color fields. Which is the notion of life and space you experience and cultivate as an artist in your works?

TD: I think that with the amount of surveillance and social media that the majority of the world participates in, knowingly or unknowingly, life, space, and technology become increasingly interchangeable terms.

Or maybe there is a new hybrid version of life that incorporates all three seamlessly. Obviously there are still divisions between the physical and the virtual, and I am interested in exploring those blurry areas. For example, if I make a drawing on my iPhone and get it printed to canvas, it becomes an automatic edition of three: the file I create, the file the NSA keeps, and the physical version. Each version has its physical and virtual implications but in wildly different directions.

RM: The art world already flourishes on new terminologies like post-net-aesthetics. How is the UNPAINTED lab 3.0 supposed to cope with the extremely fast perishing propositions and where do you see yourself there? (a lot of theoretical proposals that are market driven, i.e.. post internet art. use of consumerism as a way to reinforce the system)

TD: The convergence of post-internet with the appropriation of consumerist aesthetics was sort of interesting but always felt boring to me. I feel like there's only so far you can critique labor by making beautiful design objects. In general I feel like the post-internet conversation became passé once it became a market term mostly. I think UNPAINTED lab 3.0 might be an interesting meeting point between some of that world and some of the art and tech world.

RM: There is an urgency to replace the 'contemporary' as ontology of the present. Why do you think that the notions of art in this century turn to be so ephemeral?

TD: Object production currently feels much more geared toward documentation with the intention of image distribution online rather then well produced objects. You see with a project like the Jogging in really explicit ways but also in any artist's Instagram feed.

Oftentimes I find seeing work in person that I saw online a disappointing experience. There's definitely something mirage-like or ephemeral about that to me. I don't think it replaces painting but I think it is changing our position as viewers.

RM: As you said, the practice around 'new media' and the 'post-internet' condition is already a market. That means, it is no longer isolated. If the institutionalization of this kind of trends now represents an immediate process, from the subversive to the standardized, which is the economical use you give to this kind of aesthetics without degenerating them?

TD: It seems like a narrow view of the market to think that it wasn't already built into the career model for a new media artist. I really wonder how many young web based artists are out there without any idea of leveraging it towards a gallery career.

RM: UNPAINTED lab 3.0 accumulates a couple of dichotomies in itself; it refers to the field of painting, well known as a hierarchical field. Thus the decentralizing manners that the fairs offers, appears namely as an unclear structure, a hybrid between a market driven event and a more theoretical one, taking only art processes as departing points. Is here a certain kind of standardization happening that is relevant for the mass experience towards the role of the 'chaotic' ways of art now?

TD: I think the assumption that new media/post-internet art isn't as hierarchical as painting feels outdated. UNPAINTED lab 3.0's hybridization of the new media conference style event and the traditional art fair is interesting because it suggests that artists working in emerging mediums can exist outside of academia/the conference circuit.

Some of the artists included, I'm thinking of Jennifer Mehigan and Giovanna Olmos in particular, function really well within the world of painting without an overemphasis on the digital tools they use. I hope that beyond the jargon and classifications the audience is still interested in quality above all else.

RM: How are your works going to be presented within the UNPAINTED lab 3.0?

TD: I'm presenting a series of new prints, a two-channel installation for luxury headrest, and a single channel presentation of my video THE TOURIST - a bad neighborhood. I've been using a series of 3D model characters I purchased online to populate a lot of the new work I've been producing. I hope that it creates a little universe unto itself, with narrative threads and reoccurring running throughout, like an ensemble TV series.

RM: How do you expect them to function within the lab 3.0?

TD: Hopefully they get a lot of people to look at them.

ONLY REAL

THEODORE DARST, PETER JELLITSCH

Public Works
1539 N Damen Ave., Chicago, Illinois 60622
February 7, 2014 - April 4, 2014

DEEP SYSTEMS AT PUBLIC WORKS

BY JOEL KUENNEN

In writing this review, Dear Reader, it has been difficult to retain a narrative thread. Each work at ONLY REAL, Public Works latest exhibition, seems to reference another work in the exhibition while simultaneously opening up further implications and complications in a seemingly endless cascade of elusive meaning, contributing to a feeling that each explication is about to collapse in on itself. This feeling of anxiety of collapse is an apt affect for a series of visual explorations of the invisible. To start, Darst interrogates photographic constructions through 3D rendering while Jellitsch makes visible WiFi signals, yet both of these statements are extremely reductive.

Mesh grids of one sort or another fill most of the wall space of the second floor gallery that is situated off the city street vertex of Six Corners in Wicker Park. Rolling plains, sharp peaks, steep shadows and colorful caves are modeled, sketched and rendered. While the work of Peter Jellitsch and Theodore Darst may appear similar, the curiosities that drive their production approach from different points, coming to an intersection of mutual interest in the fields of invisible environments rendered visible. Helen Koh, co-curator along with Wallo Villacorta, in an email described the exhibit as beginning with the idea of simulation. "Both Peter and Theo play around with this idea of simulation by generating their own. This idea for both artists plays a huge part in their artistic process – whether they are directly dealing with the concept (Peter and wifi data) or not – and is manifested into a visual reality, made possible by the artists for the rest of us."

Peter Jellitsch's *Data Drawings* consist of shakily hand-drawn grids whose narrows and apices lend depth and content to the picture plane. Jellitsch then paints in shadows with black acrylic, in *Data Drawing #6*, *#7* and *#8,* roughly wrought black blocks frame the peaks and troughs, gesturing towards minimalism as a style that took on visualizations of aesthetic systems while simultaneously evoking black out zones that may exist on the periphery of these data networks. In *Data Drawing #6,* a figure taken from a theoretical physics book acts as a legend of sorts. Jellitsch has been working with WiFi data visualizations since 2011 when he started collecting WiFi

frequency data for his Bleeker Street Documents project. The visualization of WiFi, while by no means novel, is approached from a different angle with this series' emphasis on shadow, expanding Jellitsch's take on the blending planes of the real as WiFi very much affects our experience in both additive and subtractive ways (eg.: *fuck, there's no wifi*).

Reference Shelf is the figural legend of his work. The pencils the artist used to create *Data Drawings* are depicted on-end to create peaks and valleys of their own—a new topography from the act of topographical creation. The artist has photoshopped his hand into the otherwise pristine black-and-white image to provide a connection to the works on the wall. Weighted by the frame of the image, a 27.6 inch-long inkjet print of the recognizable halftone grid that signifies transparency in Photoshop rolls off the shelf. Weighting the other corner of the transparent signifier is a milled Ureol model of the topography created by the en pointe pencils. This series of representations is a kind of conceptual vanishing point, at once presenting points of conceptual origin as well as representative abstractions through reorganizing and reframing the object of representation.

Theodore Darst's works begin with the frame and bring it to life as he interrogates both the frame and the object of focus. *In the Desert. At the Movies* is his first installation piece that makes use of known characters he has worked with in the past while bringing a digital work into a physical context. Projected onto a digitally printed sheet with a projection area that is screen-printed with a blue grid, a short looped animation of blue-purple pulsing sneakers, a PS 2 gaming system and a projector rotate in space in front of animated stock footage taken from desert scenes in Algeria. The frame pulses with the same blue-purple light as the objects take turns rotating slowly in the virtual plane. The sneakers and PS 2 are familiar objects in Darst's work and in this instance are imbued with a pulsing life that calls to the fore commercial fetishization as the projector, or "beamer", seems to not only be a reflection of the source of projected light but a comment on the fetishization of the new-media world's favorite event, the BYOB – Bring-Your-Own-Beamer – an event that at one time was a practice in community building but has now become synonymous with curated shows of projected new media work.

Theodore Darst, *In the Desert. At the Movies*, 2014, 64x42 in., Digitally printed cotton, screen-printed cotton, HD video; Courtesy of the artist and Public Works.

Float Aerial, an HD3 video loop mounted on the wall starts with a wire frame that evolves and devolves into various states of representation. The perspective is that of a flyover, reminiscent of the kind of perspective gained in flight simulation games, with a soundtrack provided by Violet Systems. The overall effect of the work is narrative, the structure of the narrative provided by the affected motion engendered by the shifting gaps between the vertices of the rendered wire frame as well as the soundtrack which follows a rise and fall structure punctuated by deep beats and high percussive *tinks* like peaks and troughs. *Float Aerial* is especially notable for creating a space that is neither close nor far, the images at times being reminiscent of cell walls under the gaze of a scanning electron microscope. The created space again pulses, playing a game of perception through mathematical reorganization.

The two prints by Darst, *Benghazi* and *Hippy. Neighbor.* focus in on the patterns created in *Float Aerial* and are adjusted digitally into renderings that call up the optical illusions functioning within a photographic practice. As an artist that sources his practice from programs like Cinema 4D, the manipulation of points and lines to create space has led to an affinity and interest in photographic conventions and constructs. Speaking with Darst at the gallery, he alluded to this progression in his work by presenting two questions that have guided him as of late: "How can I look at this in terms of photography? How can I fake things using depth of field, camera angles, lighting?"

Simulation and visualization are by no means the same thing but often they are considered as such and it could be argued that they serve the same function in a regime of the hyperreal— simulations/visualizations mistaken for the object proper. Darst's work seeks out this vertex, the moment where visualization bleeds over into the plane of simulation: "at a certain point the distance stops being closeness and closeness becomes more determined by the depth of field or the focus… that moment when you are moving so close to a real-looking object from a point where it was so clearly constructed."

That's the moment, where it's all about to come together and simultaneously fall apart.

—Joel Kuennen

(Image on top: **Peter Jellitsch**, *Data Drawing #7 and Data Drawing #8 ,* 2013, Crayon and Acrylic on Paper, 42.8 x 57.7 in.; Courtesy of the artist and Public Works.)

GALLERIES

David in Decay, or Making the Digital Landscape an Analog Dreamscape

Alicia Eler | April 25, 2013

CHICAGO — Michelangelo's Renaissance masterpiece "David" presents the idealized masculine body. Chiseled and exacted over a period of three years, this perfect man stands on his pedestal, head cocked to one side, proportionate and gorgeous in his porcelain pose. Centuries after its Renaissance birth, The David stands in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence, on view for visitors. David is available on the Internet, where a digital landscape emerges from the thoughts, images, random text, and links that users generate and dump as they so desire.

The idealism engendered by David correlates to the concept behind LOSSLESS, a three-person exhibition of work by Theodore Darst, Matthew Schlagbaum, and Jordan Martins, curated by MK Meador, currently on view through May 2 at the Chicago Artists' Coalition's HATCH Projects Space. In this show, the three young artists explore questions that fall in line with questions of manifesting ideals, and also align with art historical moments posed by bodies such as "David": Is it possible to make analog that which is solely digital, dreamlike, and idealized? But in this exhibition there are no bodies, and the idea of a David-like figure takes place behind the screen.

Before entering into a heady discussion of the exhibition's analog manifestations — that is, works of art on display in the gallery — it is necessary to acknowledge two things. First, the show takes its inspiration from the term "lossless," which refers to the idea of not losing data during the compression process. If a file is rendered "lossless," then "every single bit of data that was originally in the file remains after the file is uncompressed. All of the information is completely restored," according to TechTarget. "Lossy," on the other hand, refers to a file that is altered through data loss — the JPEG image file, for example, is an image that exhibits "lossy" compression. Of course, this is concealed from the view of the casual Internet browser, who doubtfully notices much alteration in the image. This exhibition calls into question the idea that what we see may not actually be complete, instead manifesting fragmented, lossy affects, holes in an imaginary landscape that we will never detect.
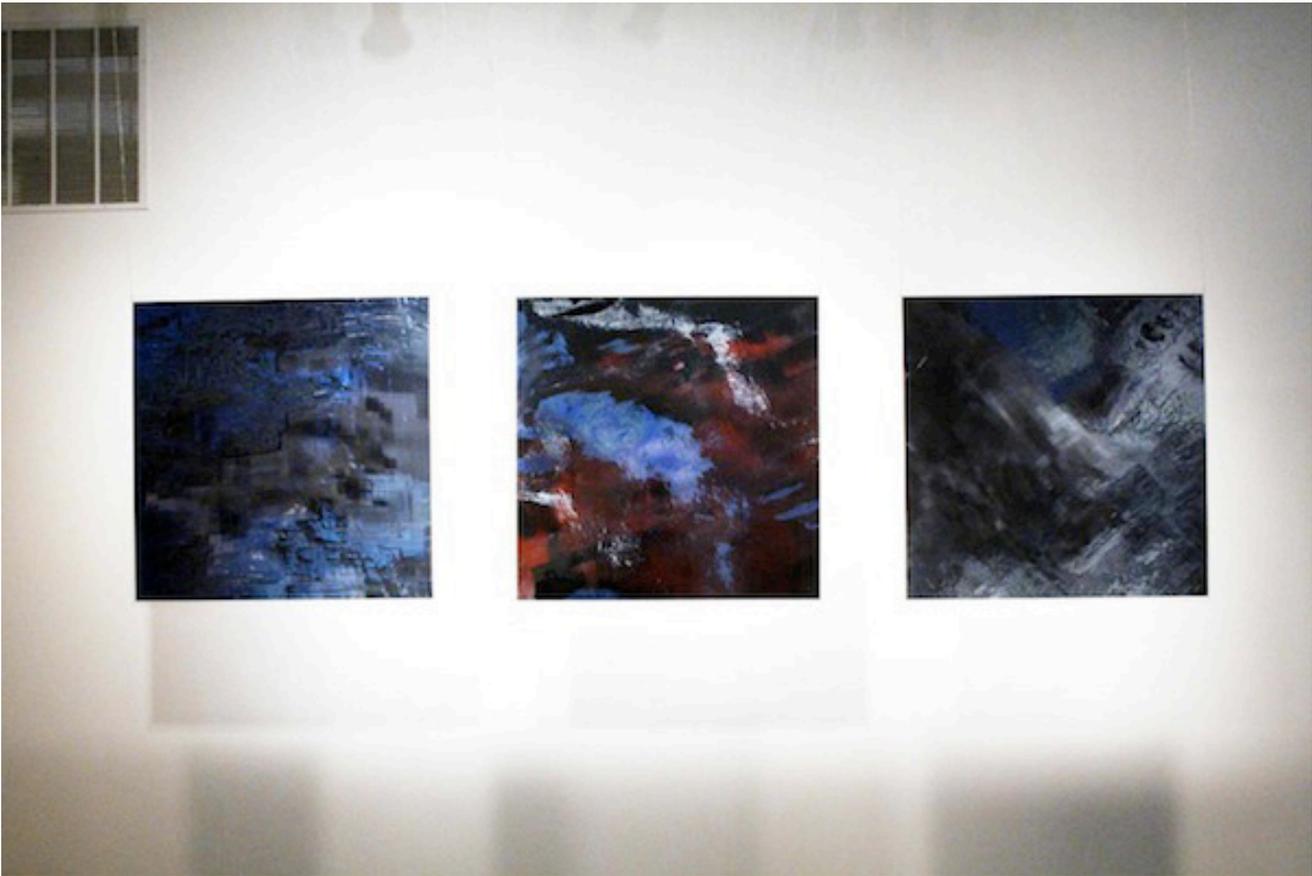
Theodore Darst, "Projection Triptych" (2013) (Image courtesy Darst's Tumblr)

The second idea that's necessary to discuss in relation to *LOSSLESS* is Theodore Darst's Twitter feed. This guy is on Twitter non-stop, like an autistic bunny rabbit on xanax hippity-hopping between physical and virtual, place to place. Last Saturday morning, I found myself browsing Twitter only to see Theo tweet out a Vine of him at the deli with his girlfriend, who he must have just met at the deli (duh lolz). Cuts of meat, fried chicken thighs, floating salty dill pickles and random shots of the floor spun by, interrupted only by a face — that of this young woman who accompanied him. We tweeted about the rapid-fire images that appeared in this Vine, and I asked why he was juxtaposing women and meat, and then I pointed him to Jana Sternbak's meat dress which obviously grossed him out. (Pause, LOLZ.) But really, he was just playing around in the digital landscape and making a Vine, and besides, it's not that deep. Then we both fluttered off into space. It is oddities like this that mix into the collaging process behind his digital assemblages in *LOSSLESS*.

Darst's work is heavy on the technical mode of making. His three-part piece "Projection Triptych" hangs from the ceiling on invisible strings, appearing like a new media artist's rendition of a Jackson Pollock abstraction — intricately layered digital collages drawn from multiple sources, including digital photography. The resulting prints look like CAD drawings, architectural renderings of first drafts, visual manifestations of digital architecture and glitch art frozen in time, all exploded into one tight work.

Theodore Darst, Fool Self Get Busted (2013) (Photo courtesy author)

"Fool Self Get Busted" (2013) looks like the base of the twin towers post-9/11, or the crusted layers of a post-apocalyptic landscape, or even just what happens when an image is scanned repeatedly, printed out, and scanned again and again into oblivion. This layered digital work, created in Photoshop and Cinema4D, marks a curious manifestation of unknown source material, including street-style, diaristic photos that Theo shot with his DSLR camera — not an iPhone — revealing a sort of personal layer, abstracted enough to not reveal anything specific yet open to interpretation. In this way, Darst's artwork appears in juxtaposition with his stream-of-consciousness Twitter feed, where anyone is free to follow a live-feed of his thoughts and whereabouts.

Jordan Martin's work is similarly involved in a technically oriented layering and collage process. His works "Jachin" (2012-13) and "Boaz" (2013) are exemplary of his intricate process of embedding collage and paint within layers of resin. Like a Hannah Höch collage minus any depictions of the body, which essentially means it is nothing like this notable Weimar artist's work, Martin's work juxtaposes varying textures to invent a new visual language that is formally abstract in nature. Like a splattered dreamscape, these works are pleasant to contemplate one by one. However, his intricate process becomes overwhelmed by just how many collages appear in this show, thus muting the power of one, two, or just three of the larger masterpieces in lieu of bite-sized abstracted pleasures.

The third cog in this wheel of a process-oriented panoply of digital idealism is Matthew Schlagbaum. His work departs from the safety of the two-dimensional plane, ultimately manifesting in three-dimensional sculpture that occupies a tall, physical presence. Unfortunately, the most captivating and poetic of these works are undermined by their titles, which instead make them feel a bit self-deprecating. Such irony is not warranted in these graceful works that occupy the space of loss in a physical way.

"Best Friends For Now" (2013) is a wooden structure housing three flickering flame lightbulbs in between sheets of metallic window screen material. It embodies a sentimentality that probes close relationships, more specifically the way that a group of three friends who were perhaps inseparable during their college days have started drifting apart in the real world. One has already departed for a life of travel, guided by work. Now the remaining two cling to their "BFF" status, which will soon disintegrate as work, relationships and new friendships begin budding where coming-of-age roots once held fast. Their relationship flickers like store-bought lightbulbs that, once the building collapses and the electricity is inevitably shut off, will burn out, never to be re-ignited again — they remain as ghost moments of a young past.