Why Pictoplasma filled out an old mortuary with digital ghosts

The character design festival is bringing strange sorts of life to Berlin's more morbid corners.

Berlin's Wedding district is less pretty than its name suggests; outside the station of the same name is your typical urban neighbourhood, populated mainly by the beloved falafel and kebab shops one sees in the city.

Walking to the group show that marks the centerpiece of character design festival Pictoplasma this year, one passes a leafy graveyard before arriving at the venue of Silent Green. Again, another pretty name, but in a former life the building used to be a crematorium, albeit a stately looking, octagonal-shaped beauty dating back to the 1900s.

It's beneath the crematorium that the Pictoplasma team have pitched their tents, hosting the *Inter_Faces* exhibit within the old mortuary of Wedding's premium fiery resting point for the dead. No bodies of course are to be seen, both crematorium and mortuary having been host for cultural events since a refitting in 2013. Taking the place of the old souls are new ghosts, holograms designed by the likes of established names like Julian Glander and exciting newbies including Elenor Kopka and Jeron Braxton.

To get to the show we walk down a steep slope into darkness where awaits us a David Luepschen piece flickering like neon tubes bedecked with googly eyes, looking like those chest-portals in *Donnie Darko* travelling at the speed of Flash. In the shadows we listen as Pictoplasma co-founder Peter Thaler reveals how *Inter_Faces* is actually the first time the festival has dared to go digital in its 15 years of running.

“We’ve always made a big effort not to show anything digital as it’s so obvious,” he says while ruminating on the festival’s founding mission to show how character design shouldn’t only be limited to animation. “When we first started the project back in 1999, it was on the verge of the internet exploding, and as the festival began we’ve seen it take upon all aspects of art and life.

“For example, our workshops over the years have never been based around a computer as people really want to get their hands dirty,” Peter continues. “All these people are spending far too long on the internet anyway, so it’s really nice to get them to sew or cut themselves by mistake as part of a real and happy experience.”

“As such our exhibitions have always been based around sculptures and paintings. But this time for the first time we’re doing an exhibition that’s completely reliant on electricity and technology. It’s a bit scary for me as I didn’t want that to happen and I’m terrified of a power cut happening, but it tells the same story we’ve always been telling – that these characters have a real quality not limited to one medium.

“Digital art after all isn’t limited to the internet; it’s something which can work in every medium.”

If you’re thinking the show is simply an old tunnel with holograms lighting up in the shadows then think again. After walking through a large room housing Lucas Zanotto’s colourful boards as they watch with mechanised eyes, one is faced with a projected landscape that frames an interface and what’s best described as a catwalk of sorts.

The interface flickers into life with a random character by one of the group, waiting for its first human victim to take the stage.

Walking along the catwalk, sensors trigger the character into

life, with some choosing to dance, others to go up close and look you up close; some like Julian Glander’s muscly baby below decide to get their lifts on. One creation by Elenor Kopka howls and screeches like a disturbed ghost, intense atmospheric sound daring you to stay on the stage as it looks you dead in the eyes.

Pictoplasma? Ecto-plasma, more like.

Elenor Kopka’s digital ghost

It’s all great fun and games, enough to make you forget that the large dark space you find yourself in used to be full of bodies and, in Peter’s words, “a huge robot like in *The Matrix* which would pick up a body and deliver it all the way to be burnt.”

He has a smile on his face as he says it, and that’s the general spirit of Pictoplasma 2019, if not Pictoplasma in general. With another exhibition to be found in a cemetery near the conference venue featuring bright and beautiful works by Laurie Rowan (below) and Yukai Du, it’s clear the team want to bring a sunny kind of life back to Berlin’s more morbid corners.

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