

Kurt Ralske's 'Avatar One D' at Young Projects Boils James Cameron's Blockbuster Down to a Single Line  
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Kurt Ralske has not seen Avatar. "I guess I just assumed I wouldn't like it," says the New York-based artist, even though his exhibition "The Mechanical Bride," installed in the second of Young Projects' labyrinthine Pacific Design Center spaces through Jan. 6, includes a riff on the blockbuster.

Called Avatar One D, the piece reduces the movie to the height of a single pixel, creating a line of light that spans the width of the screen. It plays in an empty, dark screening room with speakers on either side that project all 2 hours and 42 minutes of the actual Avatar audio. "I meant it as a joke, a one-liner," Ralske says. "We used to be satisfied with a 2-D plane, and now we want 3-D. What about a 1-D surface?"

Reducing Avatar was simpler than Ralske's other work. As usual, he had to design custom software, because the visual effects program After Effects wouldn't allow him to extract the one pixel he needed, but it didn't involve all the computer vision techniques, analysis and reprocessing he did when he collapsed the whole F.W. Murnau film Faust into three minutes or gorgeously compiled all the longest shots in Yasujiro Ozu's Tokyo Story.

"I have this idea that it's not good unless I've worked really hard on it, but this ended up being more substantial than I expected," he says of Avatar One D. "You take away all the content and you're left with light and space."

Watch Avatar in one dimension and you'll become acutely aware of how the light in the film shifts in color and intensity. The installation reminds Ralske of James Turrell and Dan Flavin, artists whose work with single columns of shifting, colored light or successions of fluorescent bulbs was just about sensory experience. "A lot of digital work tries to get extra credit because of how complicated it is, but maybe people can appreciate it just as pleasure," he says.

"Usually, I'm attracted to older films," he adds. "I started working with cinema to set up a new relationship with the past. I think we're all taking some stance in relation to history anyway. Maybe we're diving into it because we think it can teach us something or because we want to escape the present."

Ralske is never entirely sure what he's looking for when he starts applying digital algorithms to historic films, except that he hopes to stumble upon something hidden that can only be understood in the present.

For Enraged Algorithm, Ralske applied facial-recognition software, used today to identify terrorists, to the Arab warriors in the 1966 film Battle of Algiers, and strung together a line of blown-up, stoic face shots. For The Inevitables, he developed a program that trolls cinema files to find film sequences that most resemble each other in terms of the shapes of the images, then runs them side by side. The program paired Joan of Arc with 2001: A Space Odyssey, and Breakfast at Tiffany's with The Seventh Seal.

While Avatar One D may not reconfigure history the way Ralske's other projects do, it does demystify 3-D. It separates the narrative from the special effects, and watching it feels less like being along for the ride and more like being in the driver's seat than feature films usually do. Each viewer decides how long to stay, and whether to piece together the story or just ignore the sound to stare into the screen.

"Now that I've experienced Avatar as 162 minutes of audio and light," Ralske says, "I probably should see it."