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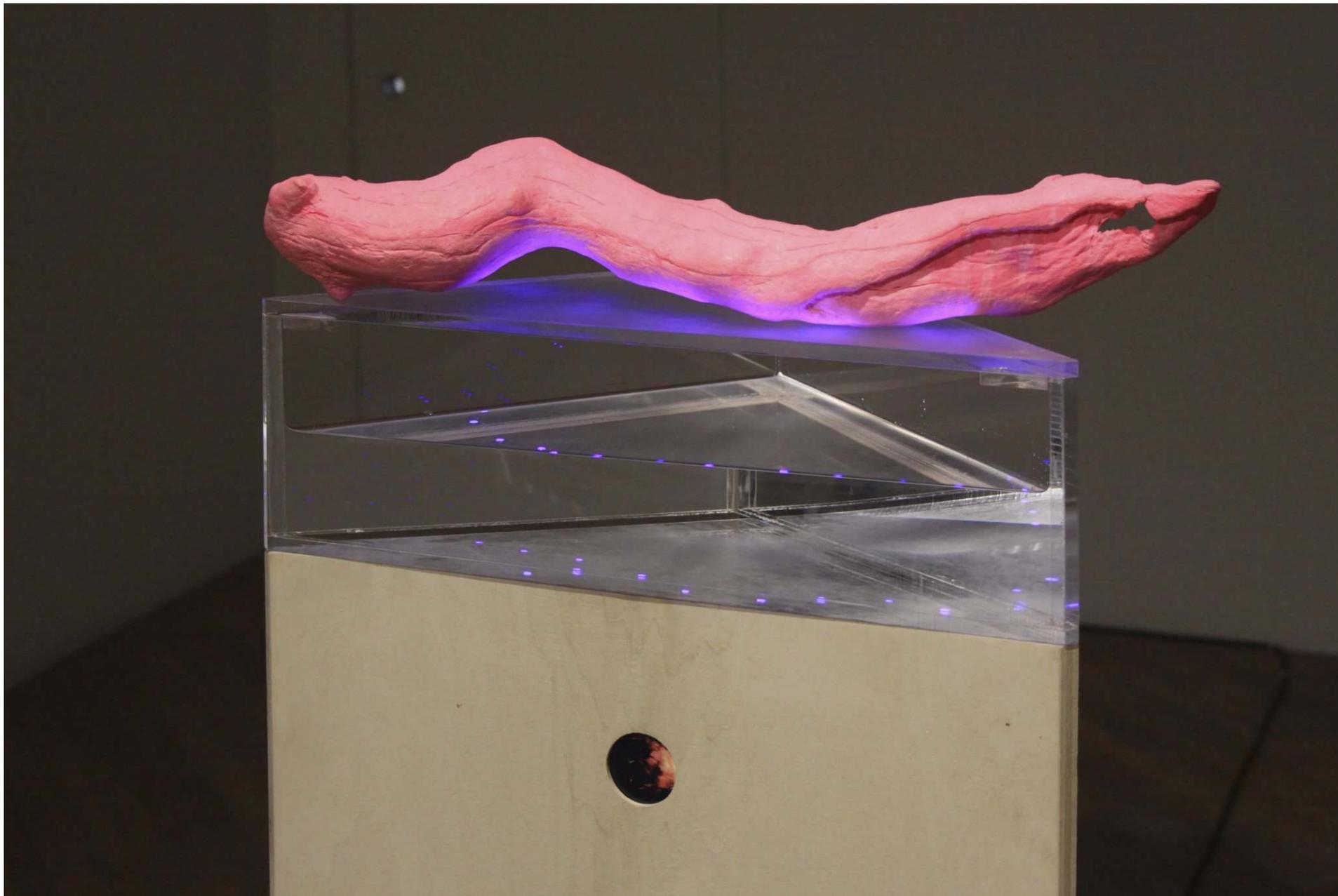
The Arts

Back to the future, back to reality

Collaborative artists imagine future relics of technological present

By: Steven Leyden Cochrane

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Anna Eyler's Fugue in 3 Steps

'Utopia' might mean "no place," but we're sold the idea each new advance in technology brings us one step closer. Reality looks a bit different.

With every "magical," "beautiful" gewgaw debuted in Cupertino, Seoul or Guangzhou, the stuff of science fiction becomes just more stuff to buy and junk later. Virtual communities meant to be unbounded radical democracies wind up amplifying the ugliest, most entitled refrains of real-life "discourse."



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Nicolas Lapointe's *Regard des Mages*

Granted, we also sent a robot 6.5 billion kilometres to land on a comet and take pictures. There's still room for wonder, and, for many, a glimmer of utopian promise clings stubbornly to the horizon.

The sculptures and video in *beyond différence, and now* are real things, obviously, but frequent collaborators Anna Eyler and Nicolas Lapointe take an ambivalent position on reality, behaving a bit like amateur archaeologists from an imagined future. The Montreal artists' work keeps one foot in the virtual realm, gently reminding us to watch our step.

The minimal installation — a pile of rocks here, a hunk of driftwood there — creates a misleading sense of routine order. Turn your back for a second, though, and one of five oddly similar river stones in a Plexiglas vitrine might start to buzz and tremble. The "wood" and "rocks" are all cast-resin replicas, unnaturally hued and lit to look like digital renderings made real, some inset with hidden motors and tiny LED displays.

Even as we note the deception, we identify with the objects. The screen built into a piece of pink plastic "driftwood" washed up on a pile of glittering sand plays back a video of crashing

waves, a looping memory of time at sea. You kind of feel for another virtual log in back, lit by a heatless virtual fire.

In a kinetic sculpture by Lapointe, a smartphone-sized display orbits, near eye level, at the end of a robotic arm. Onscreen, a virtual camera circles a lander-type spacecraft, moving in the opposite direction. Following the image around in real space feels like dancing, and the encounter evokes the unusually personal connection many feel with doomed Mars rovers or, for that matter, their own handheld devices.

At their artist talk at Aceartinc., a video of Eyler and Lapointe waltzing through the empty gallery ran in place of images. Their work can feel a bit precious — a bit Pixar — but there are signs of turbulence beneath the clean, consumer-ready surfaces.

The pair's two-metre stack of pale blue "rocks," evoking a spine, a cairn, or Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*, emerges from a cardboard shipping box, an ambivalent monument to unchecked production and consumption. Other fictional artifacts offer poignant but critical reflections on obsolescence and our material legacy, all while looking not unlike light-up junk from the Sharper Image catalogue. The artists maintain this tension to rewarding effect.

Themes of virtual reality, alienation, abstraction, an ambivalent outcomes come together in Eyler's video *How to explain love to a tape measure*.

"Filmed" in the idealistically conceived virtual environment *Second Life*, Eyler replaces sexually explicit animations uploaded by users with thrusting patterned polygons, staging the trysts in computer-generated "natural" landscapes. The abstract grinding is unnerving, but, by stripping back knee-jerk misogyny to reveal the hapless flailing underneath, Eyler also uncovers something human and maybe not completely irredeemable.

Our technological present might be garbage, but future archaeologists might still find something worth salvaging.

Steven Leyden Cochrane is a Winnipeg-based artist, writer and educator.