

# SHAMUS CLISSET'S FAKESHAMUS

By Carlos Saez



Shamus Clisset is not a photographer, but this does not mean he is a digital artist either. Many digital artists employ aesthetics that are tied to a specific software or the (in)capabilities of a given program. Such instances are largely reliant on responses to commands and glitches, producing work that points to systematic flaws. Although glitch aesthetics are emblematic of contemporaneity and also reveal the underpinnings of a given (software) system, these efforts invariably communicate the same concept. Distinct from this methodology, Clisset uses software and technologies for their capabilities as tools, rather than merely pointing to their flaws, demonstrating that the output is only as strong as the input.

Carlos Saez met with the NYC-based artist to discuss FakeShamus, an alter ego of Clisset's, alternate universes.

Carlos Saez: First time I contacted you, I told you I like the way you mix real with 3D. You wrote me back explaining that everything in your work is digitally generated. Talk to us about this (does it relate to your alter ego name FakeShamus?).

Shamus Clisset: One thing I'm really interested in achieving with 3D rendering is a sort of hyper-fake quality. You want to believe it, it looks incredibly real, but at the same time there's no way it can be real. I mix very banal objects and more glitchy, abstract and surreal elements in order to exaggerate that effect.

I am also interested in playing with ideas from the larger culture of the medium of 3D as well. In this case of realistic objects, thinking about how a lot of product imagery, in advertising for example, is actually created completely digitally, not photographed. So we are surrounded by these perfectly rendered images of cars and drink bottles and everything looks absolutely flawless, but really we're just seeing an illusion or perfect idea of those things, not the real thing. So building a slick model of a beer can or a car, or football helmet and using those as compositional elements in my work has a resonance with that illusionistic phenomenon for me.

So yes, the culture of fakeness really affects what I'm doing. And the FakeShamus alter ego does stem somewhat from that. The natural progression for me after getting past the basics of modeling and rendering was to generate a larger world within the 3D space and populating it with not just objects, but characters. Specifically for Fake Shamus I began thinking of a digital manifestation of the Golem myth and similar stories of idols and the supernatural. He is not really supposed to be me, but I can project a lot of my obsessions through him. The idea of a creature or alter ego able to traverse this limitless digital space allows me to fit him into whatever symbology I want to explore.

CS: Due to its realism, your constantly vertical images look like pictures you take to an art installation. This meta-process reminds me of some kind of art coverage from a fictional life. Can you tell us a bit about the process you follow in order to create your work?

SC: It's interesting, because I never think of any of the stuff as residing anywhere outside the computer and I am especially not

thinking of them as “art” installations. When I’m working, I get so absorbed in the process that the interface melts away and it feels like looking through a portal into an alternate dimension. It’s like gaining a special power to see into and manipulate a completely separate universe that never existed before. There’s also an aspect of it that feels like projecting my inner thoughts and imagery into that space—like manifesting these things in the void. So there is my train of thought, various threads of which always carry from one image to the next. There’s no linear narrative to speak of, but there are connections throughout that are constantly morphing, looping back on themselves, or projecting forward, as I work on one piece to the next.

CS: The point of view from where you want us to see these surrealistic situations is very human. The composition is very photographic. Is there any photography in the background?

SC: No actually, my background was in painting. The photographic connection is just due to the nature of the rendering software, which projects the 3D environment and objects into a 2D image. By definition that’s basically what photography does. But I think of the compositional process as more painterly and the building of the various objects and elements is closest to sculpture. So it’s really a mix of different qualities from various media, but it’s unique from all of them. I see it as a separate format, as different from photography as photography was from painting, when it was first introduced.

CS: Did you ever think about bringing some of these totems from your alternative digital world to real life?

SC: People have often asked me if I would ever make sculptures of these things and with 3D printing it’s definitely a possibility. But there’s a quality that I have always wanted to preserve, to try and keep the work as true to its non-physical nature in the computer. I almost feel like bringing the 3D objects into the real world would steal their essence somehow. They would just become lumps of material instead of residing in that limbo of digital space. In terms of the prints I make, they function almost as secondary documentation of the work (this probably explains some of your previous question about them feeling like art installations). They are like glimpses into the digital world, or like trying to document some supernatural quality like spirit photography. The irony is, before the realistic render and print, everything looks relatively clunky and basic in the computer interface. It’s the rendering process itself that brings everything to life – in a way the opposite of the superstition that a photograph can steal a person’s soul. Funny to think about...

CS: The elements you use seem to respond to a “chemical reduction” of stories. Other times they look like a crazy mix of objects. But in a way that makes someone feel that they were made to be together in this environment. Can you explain the process of selection and composition of these elements?

SC: Every element makes some kind of sense to me, even if it’s not apparent to anybody else—I have a lot of inside jokes with myself. Sometimes it’s a pretty clear connection in the context of the overall scene, but just as often it’s a completely tangential relationship that just clicked as I was working, or it’s something that has a personal connotation. Mostly I start with just one main object in mind, or a very rough idea of the environment, and slowly it gets populated with elements as I work through testing things. The connections tend to just pop in my head and the good ones stay while the rest are thrown out. There are dozens of variations of each scene that I try out before getting to the final composition. Sometimes I go on long stretches in the studio just building objects that I think are interesting that I might use some day. They don’t have a direct use that I am thinking of at the time, but they have some quality that I know I will want to use for something. I have a huge library of objects like that.



CS: I attended your show during Brooklyn Art Week 2013 in Bushwick. Your large scale and HQ prints seem like windows through which you can directly enter your alternative reality. Especially FakeShamus Conjuring the Countach was really powerful. Is the size part of the piece?

SC: Yeah the scale is definitely important. A lot of my imagery (and the selection for that show in particular) is meant to be really epic and in your face and the scale is part of that. I am also making a conscious gesture with my x-large prints to make something that is not just big, but hyper-sharp and detailed at that size. At that scale those are qualities that digital rendering is



uniquely capable of, there is no resolution limit. So I'm setting it apart from photography in that way. And not only that, I'm also marking my territory in the digital world, in a sense, because a lot of digital work does not hold up very well up close in print, it only has to look good on screen. But more recently I've been working on quieter, more focused pieces along with the more bombastic and the sizing varies accordingly.

CS: You showed up in Postmasters Gallery last year, what is your impression of printed digital art in the art market?

SC: It's an interesting question, because painting is always the overall market winner, and a lot of digital art that gets hype lately tends to be internet-related, even if there is a printed aspect of the artist's work. But I don't fit either of those. I've done some internet-based projects, but the screen is really limiting to the kind of experience I want the viewer to have. As mentioned I do see myself more connected to painting in some ways, but my hope is that people will see the prints as standing on their own. As far as other digital printing and the larger art market all I can say is there are a lot of artists doing a lot of different things now and it's basically impossible to categorize based on working mediums—ideas are way more important than media anyway.

CS: I have seen some animated Clissets lately, is it going to be the next thing?

SC: I've definitely been exploring that stuff. My ideas still come up mostly as static images, but it's a good challenge for me to picture how things can interact and change over time. It gives me a new set of frameworks to explore, with new surprises. I'm very interested in developing some sort of FakeShamus game that would allow more of an interactive experience with an open-ended environment. I have lots of plans for that, and I've begun some steps in that direction, but it's probably a ways off for now.

CS: What do you think about the mind uploading? Would you choose the real world or a Clisset landscape?

SC: Well, coming back to the idea of projecting my ideas and imagery into the digital world, I think it's very interesting to imagine what we could create if we achieved the technology that actually allowed for that. Having said that, the world I create for my work is intentionally pretty dark. It's more of a reflection on the negative aspects of what has happened in the past in real life. When faced with new frontiers, there has tended to be a lot of violence and ruin of the new territory. Part of the joke is: here's a new untouched universe that I've made and I set my FakeShamus character free to explore and he is basically wrecking it as I create it. But of course, I'm the builder and destroyer of all of it.

CS: Do you have any avatars in the URL?

SC: No, I don't have any avatars in any of those online spaces or games. I think I've made a Mii for the Nintendo Wii before, but that's about it.

CS: What kind of music plays in the environments you create?

SC: Probably something like the soundtrack from a shopping mall, but remixed by Venetian Snares.

CS: Choose one software that you would use exclusively for the rest of your life.

SC: If I could only pick one program it would have to be the raytracing software that I use, called Indigo. That's where the magic feeling comes from, when I click the render button and the real image appears for the first time. Although that would leave me unable to create almost all of the objects and scenes you see in the renders. So I would also need my modeling program, Blender (it's free software so maybe you'll allow it...)

CS: Which superhero's appearance would you like to redesign?

SC: I'm not too big on superheroes, really. In high school we had to replace our school mascot, the Redskins, with something



less culturally offensive. The name was shortened to the "Reds", but no one knew what that meant. I was commissioned to design the new mascot image, as voted by all the students. The concept everyone chose was a kind of superhero jester character. It only lasted a couple years before being replaced by a bulldog, or something like that, but for a little while it looked pretty cool. Anyway, I think redesigns of old characters are generally a bad idea. Better to come up with some new heroes / villains and new mythologies.

CS: Imagine Adobe is launching a program specified in generating and designing your own 3D pizza ready to print. What name and short form would it have? (Photoshop/ Ps, After Effects/ Ae,...)

SC: "Pizzashop" may be too obvious, but the short name would definitely be "Za", of course.

