



New Georgetown Art Gallery Opens With An Exhibit That's Designed To Distract You

Lenore T. Adkins // 18 APR 19

You know the feeling: You're in the middle of a conversation when your phone buzzes with an annoying alert, interrupting you mid-sentence as you automatically look down to read it.

That's the experience *MENTAL*, a new multimedia exhibition from New York-based artist Tabor Robak at Georgetown's new von ammon co gallery, wants to replicate. The exhibition, which opened earlier this month, explores what happens to the human mind as technology competes for your attention.

The 10 multi-channel video installations and animated pieces in the exhibit include neon multimedia assemblages, hanging LED screens with animated text messages about mental health, and sculptural video.

For example, “MiniJumbo,” an ever-changing mini Jumbotron, represents a floating distraction. Its random messages include, “New Addictive Substance,” “Sale!,” “Louder” and “Decline In Birth Rate Is Good.”

“I wanted to capture the feeling of all the interruptions buzzing in the back of our minds that come as a result of all the pop-up notifications and advertising copy directed at us every day,” Robak said in a statement. “Specifically, in the way that advertising today is not just ‘Buy Soda!’ More than ever it is aimed at our lifestyles, virtues and anxieties. Not just ‘What do I want?’ but ‘What do I want to be?’”

Another piece on a holographic LED fan called “Buzzsaw” constantly changes with 30 fictional, three-dimensional, animated corporate logos Robak invented.

“It’s supposed to tell a story about modern life, just through the lens of corporate imaging, but it’s also meant to look like this phantom that’s emanating from nowhere,” says Todd von Ammon, the gallery’s owner.

The solo show marks Robak’s first exhibition in Washington, D.C.—his work has appeared all over the world including in London at The Serpentine Galleries, in Rome at the 12th Lyon Biennale, and in Tokyo at the Museum of Contemporary Art. He’s also been featured in New York City at the Museum of Modern Art and in public collections inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and at Team Gallery.

MENTAL is also the first gallery exhibit for von ammon co, a 3,500-square-foot gallery situated inside a former warehouse.

Prior to his D.C. arrival, von Ammon headed up the Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco, and later spent seven years as director for Team Gallery in New York City.

About a year ago, he established von ammon co as an independent curatorial firm; his space in Cady’s Alley—which he says is dedicated to non-traditional media formats—is the first one he’s run independently.

The spot is a major coup for von Ammon, 32, who says well-known artists are much more likely to show their exhibitions in large galleries like his because they can do justice to artists’ creations.

“This is a completely new body of work for Tabor, it’s exciting and it’s different from what he’s made before, so you don’t want to take half measures there,” von Ammon says. “You want to knock it out of the park and that requires space.”

Though the Smithsonians are the giants of the D.C. art scene, von ammon is joining a healthy roster of smaller galleries that feature emerging artists and nontraditional mediums. Flashpoint Gallery downtown, for example, presented a particularly buzzy piece of performance art earlier this year in which an Ivanka Trump lookalike vacuumed up breadcrumbs. Honfleur Gallery, Transformer, Gallery Neptune & Brown, Gallery O on H, and several other spaces scattered around town also spotlight smaller names in intimate settings. Von ammon also has peers in its Georgetown neighborhood: Addison/Ripley, another commercial art gallery, is just up the street, and Georgetown University’s tiny Maria & Alberto de la Cruz Art Gallery, specializing in contemporary art, opened last summer.

Philippe Lanier, principal at EastBanc, which developed Cady’s Alley where von Ammon’s gallery is leasing space, says the only advice he gave von Ammon was to choose an artist who wasn’t so edgy or expensive that it missed the mark for his debut showing. He’s aiming to redefine D.C.’s—and especially Georgetown’s—commercial art landscape, starting with von ammon.

“We have to make sure that we curate the whole neighborhood with a wide variety of things that are exciting to experience viscerally, visually, and art is one of them,” he says.

Tabor Robak’s ‘MENTAL’ at von ammon co., Washington, DC. runs until November 02 2019

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