

John McCaughley // Artist Statement, 1500 Words



Caught between a two-bed flat and a childhood home; co-existing in memory, physicality and virtuality. The house is a landscape of corners, nests and dreams. In virtual worlds the front door is present and yet obsolete.

223at43 is an immersive world designed and built for VRChat. Drawing influence from Gaston Bachelard's 'The Poetics of Space' the world reimagines the memories of the childhood home, 43, from the perspective of a two bed-flat, 223.

'...our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word' (Bachelard, 1957).

Bachelard's exploration of the phenomenon of the house and its intimate values influenced the work; he emphasizes the house's role as a repository for memories, dreams, and a symbol of protected intimacy. This VR world is a gallery of my memories; curated moments and dreams from the artist presented as an intimate space for daydreaming.

The 'Phantom Sculpture' exhibit stimulated ideas of how works of different decades can be curated to form new interactions. 'Phantom Sculpture' exhibited work of 23 artists who shaped the development of British sculpture over the last century. Over the run the exhibition's initial artworks were replaced creating an evolving space. This, in turn, created new meaning to surrounding works. I found parallels with ideas of home, and the curation of memories over time.

Amidst the 'Phantom Sculpture' exhibit was Anthony Caro's "After Emma" (1977-82). Caro experimented with form and focused on "drawing in space" rather than adhering to figurative traditions. Seeing Caro's work in the gallery space informed my exploration of structure; the floor plan of my childhood home is reconstructed out of virtual beams, the bones of the house. This structure provided nooks and corners to become a 'resting-place for daydreaming' (Bachelard, 1957).

223at43 is a virtual gallery where different memories, ideas and distinct styles co-exist and are curated across a virtual landscape. In these nooks and corners digital installations have been installed; a selected overview of the works and their significance follows.

Digital Installations

The Façades of the Building

Photogrammetry / 3D Modeling

Photogrammetry was utilized to capture the façade of the childhood home; taking 3d representations of the surface of object. These representations are distorted through the process, lumpy and melting. Though the scans are far from perfect; the distorted scans spoke to this idea of memory, space and virtuality.

Digital Flowers

Photogrammetry / OpenBrush / Digital Retexturing



'Digital Flowers' draw musings from readings of David Chalmers, 'Virtual worlds are real. Virtual objects are real' (Chalmers, 2022). The piece looks at the imagined dialog of a family unit; 4 chairs at a table. The chairs were Inspired by artist, Salventius' and their series 'Soul Seat'. They were painted in Virtual Reality, utilizing OpenBrush and the Oculus passthrough feature to 'trace' furniture. This bridged the gap between digital and virtual through guiding the quest controller over a physical object and capturing the hand movement and gesture. 'Digital flowers' considers this duality between physical and virtual, and the meaning we give to objects. Whether natural, synthetic, or virtual the meaning of the object stays true. 'you always said it was the thought that counted'.

Sons at Work

readyplayerme / Mixamo / Digital Retexturing



'Sons at Work' sits outside the structure of the house; drawing on childhood memories of weeding the front garden in the summer; household chores on a public stage. The sense of security of the home is lost in these moments, a wish to be invisible but inevitably seen.

PLEASE DO NOT DRAW ON THE WALLS

QVPens / Sign / imagination



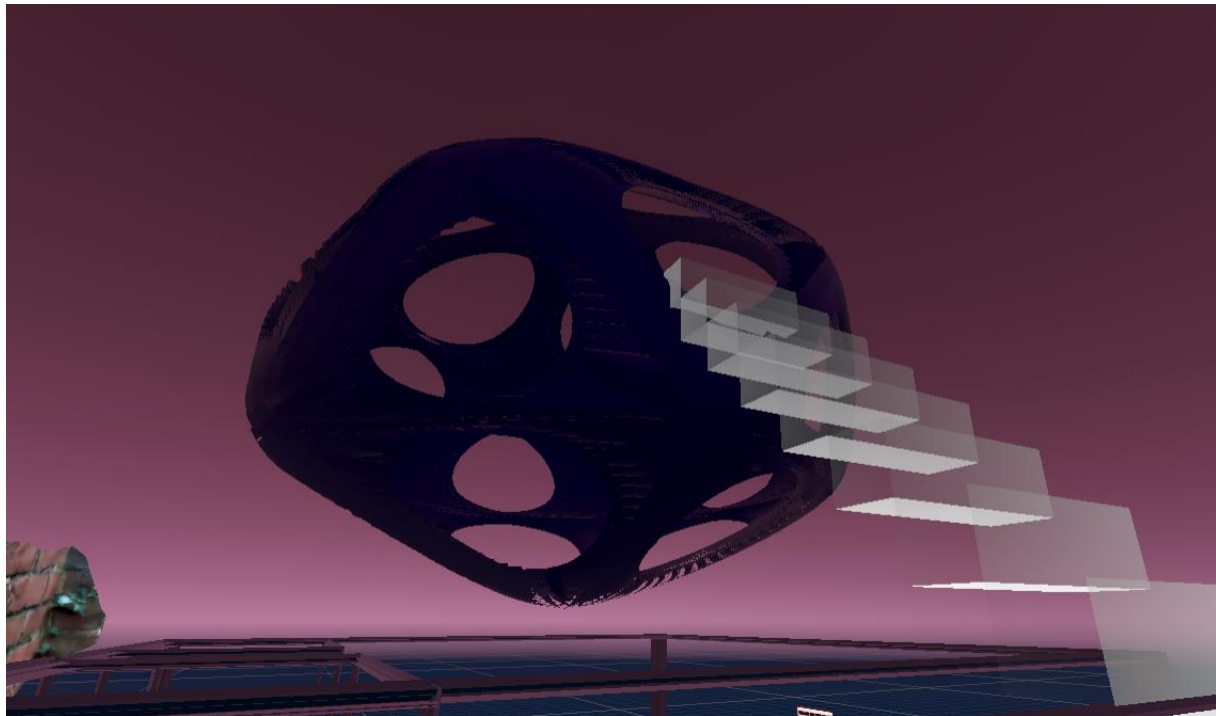
'PLEASE DO NOT DRAW ON THE WALLS' is not a warning; it is an invitation. Inspired by my experience in VRChat muted but communicating through drawing. This piece encourages visitors to daydream through

drawing. My experience felt primitive and childlike; two people, physical locations unknown sat drawing with virtual crayons, in a virtual world, expressing thoughts, ideas and emotions through images.

‘To play is to be in the world. Playing is a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others. Play is a mode of being human’ (Sicart, 2014).

The Nest

Digital Icosphere Modeled & Abstracted



Of daydreaming Bachelard writes ‘And when we reach the very end of the labyrinths of sleep, when we attain to the regions of deep slumber, we may perhaps experience a type of repose that is pre-human; pre-human, in this case, approaching the immemorial’ (Bachelard, 1957). As one travels through 223at43 our understanding of the home becomes more abstract as we slip into daydreams. A choice can be made to walk above the rooms of the house and ascend above the final bedroom to nest. ‘Physically, the creature endowed with a sense of refuge huddles up to itself, takes to cover, hides away, lies snug, concealed’ (Bachelard, 1957) ‘The Nest’ aims to present feelings of security and comfort; it has an overview of the house; a room for dreaming.

Value in the Virtual Home

The stage play ‘The Real and Imagined History of the Elephant Man’, written by Tom Wright and Directed by Stephen Bailey with the Nottingham Playhouse provides insight into the absence of home.

The play is based on Joseph Merrick, who lived in London in the late 19th century. This stage adaptation explores the impact of societal norms on individuals who are perceived as different with a strong focus

on the notion of home and belonging. The root theme focuses on movement and the avoidance of being noticed, trapped and 'collected' for your differences.

The show uses a large box frame to convey these ideas of being trapped; on seeing the show I reflect on my own use of this structure in 223at43. I used it to explore the structure of the home, the foundations. Readings from Bachelard gave ideas of corners providing opportunity for nests and daydreaming. The themes of the play made me reflect on the architecture of my building but also the themes of community and belonging.

Through watching 'We Met in Virtual Reality' (2022) it is clear that VRChat offers sanctuary, safety and home to those who seek it. 'The Elephant Man' is a poignant exploration of society's treatment of those who deviate from conventional norms and a reflection on the meaning of humanity and empathy; an important moral whist creating a world that aims to encompass the feeling of home.

'We Met in Virtual Reality', 2022 documentary, showcases VRChat's ability to enable communities, relationships and societies. The film documents the lives of individuals exploring virtual reality as a form of escape from the 2020 pandemic where physical contact was unattainable as well as escape from personal issues. Daniel Fienberg, of The Hollywood Reporter, commented 'there's nothing synthetic about the emotions you feel' (Fienberg, 2022). If we look at this through the lens of Bachelard's poetics of space, we can see VRChat has provided people opportunity to 'nest' in VR homes, form meaningful relationships, and dream.

'...until she laments that the clouds aren't moving, you could almost forget that they're virtual as well.' (Fienberg, 2022)

Home Improvements

A home is not a project that can be completed, it is lived in, things break, and it evolves. I aim to keep 223at43 as an evolving project.

I am in the process of creating a 24-minute looping sequence that shows the progression of the hours of the day. The lighting adjusts throughout the sequence and will be accompanied by a 24-minute score of music.

As I continue to develop worlds for social VR I want to consider how the boundaries between physical and virtual can be bridged. I have carried out early prototyping in touchdesigner with the Kinect to control the lights and the texture of objects. Using midi singles could provide opportunities to send data to control elements in VRChat worlds.

When considering the home, gesture, and dreaming, I think of the kettle. As an object the kettle has significance in its purpose; in the morning it is used to make coffee to wake us, in the evening a calming drink to calm down, in the cold to fill a hot water bottle, and for sustenance to cook. I have started exploring the possibilities of using microphones to take the audio output of the kettle, and through touchdesigner and a midi-player create an input to control assets in Unity. After development, I hope to implement this so my physical kitchen appliance could affect 223at43 in real-time.

To the new occupant

The house we were born in, according to Bachelard, is not merely a physical space but a repository of dream values. In the development of this work, I have found a deeper appreciation of the value of a 'house', and recontextualized the definition of home within the context of Social VR. Bachelard invites consideration that virtual spaces can hold psychological depth, dynamic paths, and capacity for intimate experiences, that emerge as contemporary arenas for daydreaming.

Make yourself at home.

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