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STILL LIFE
(BETAMALE)

PLUGS BY GARY ZHEXI ZHANG

For me, Jon Rafman will always be one of the seedy sadboys of contemporary art. It has been interesting to witness his rising profile in the last couple of years, with solo exhibitions across the world, including this year's exquisitely titled *I have ten thousand compound eyes and each is named suffering* at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Such blockbuster shows, featuring lavish installations and sleek virtual reality productions, have brought the artist's excavations of digital realms into the broad daylight of commercial and critical acclaim. However, Rafman's finest works arguably belong where they began: on the internet. They ought to be encountered alone, preferably by accident, your eyes straining into the early hours of the morning, lit only by the glow of the laptop screen. Both ethnographer and native, he has a talent for prising open the darker layers of our technologically mediated psyches. At its best, the work takes your hand and digs deep behind the sofa cushions – buried between the dankness and the debris, your blind fingers discover the warm, crusty contours of something obscenely and desperately vital: a pulse.

Like all of us who are enamoured with technology, Rafman is a romantic in

the proper sense, in search of something long gone, or just out of reach. It has been suggested that technology is always about loss. The philosopher Bernard Stiegler attributes humanity's existence as technical beings to the 'fault of Epimetheus'. Named after 'hindsight', Epimetheus was tasked with distributing traits to all the animals – but he ran out before he arrived at human beings, leaving it to his more celebrated fire-giving brother, Prometheus ('foresight'), to sort out the mess. In this reading, our experience of the world is always already technological, prosthetic, driven on by a gaping hole in the middle. An orifice in search of a plug. In Rafman's online trilogy – to my mind his best work to date – comprising *Still Life (Betamale)* (2013), *Mainsqueeze* (2014), and *Erysichthon* (2015), the artist's internet-enabled gaze surveys a landscape of desire produced by and for technology. The anxious momentum of the digital screen is impelled by libidinal lack, driven to exhaustion and saturation – spent. Taking on the voice of a digital *id*, these works portray an online unconscious in which permissive freedom produces new frontiers of transgression (cf. Rule 34), and informational abundance invents terrifying excess.







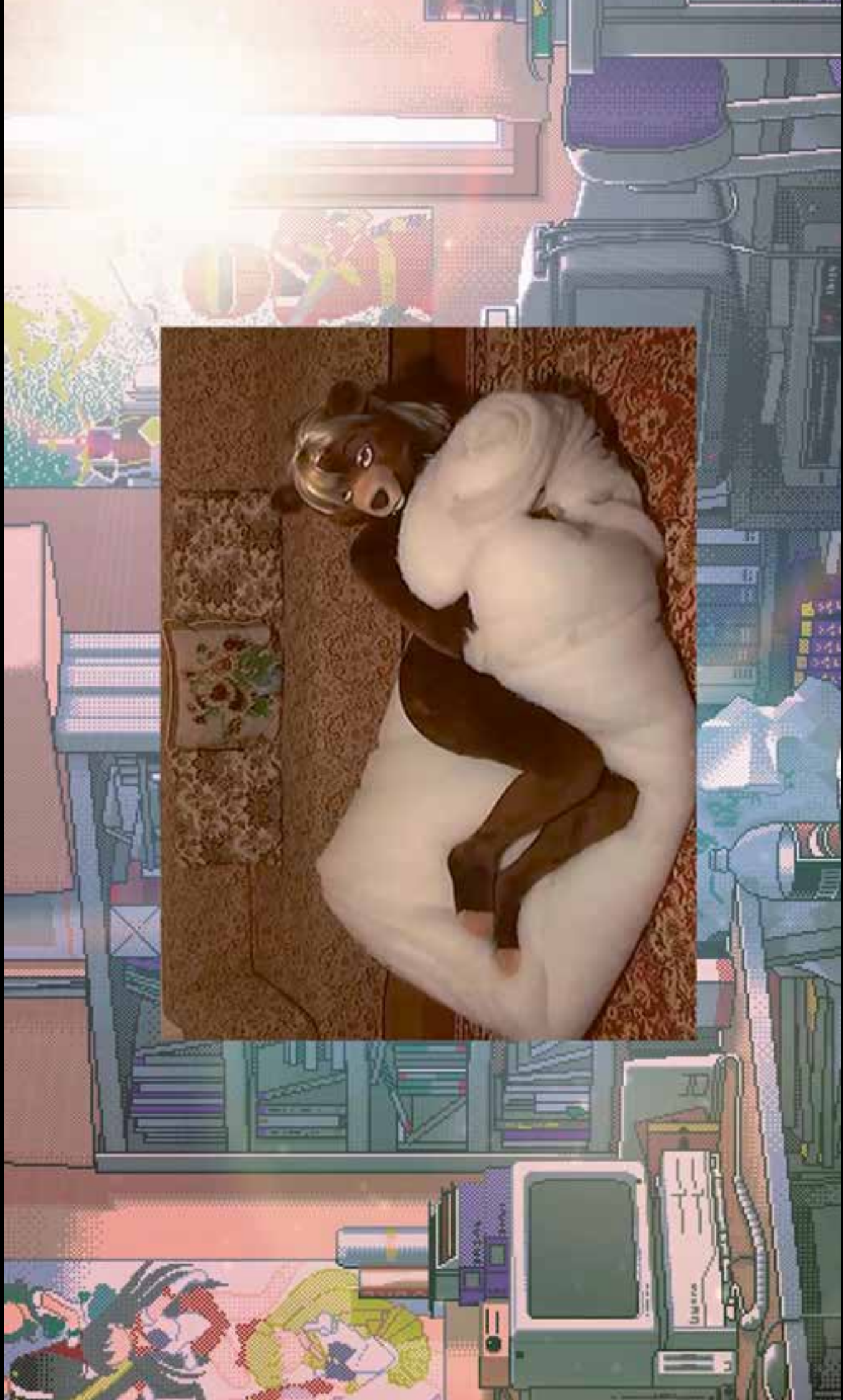




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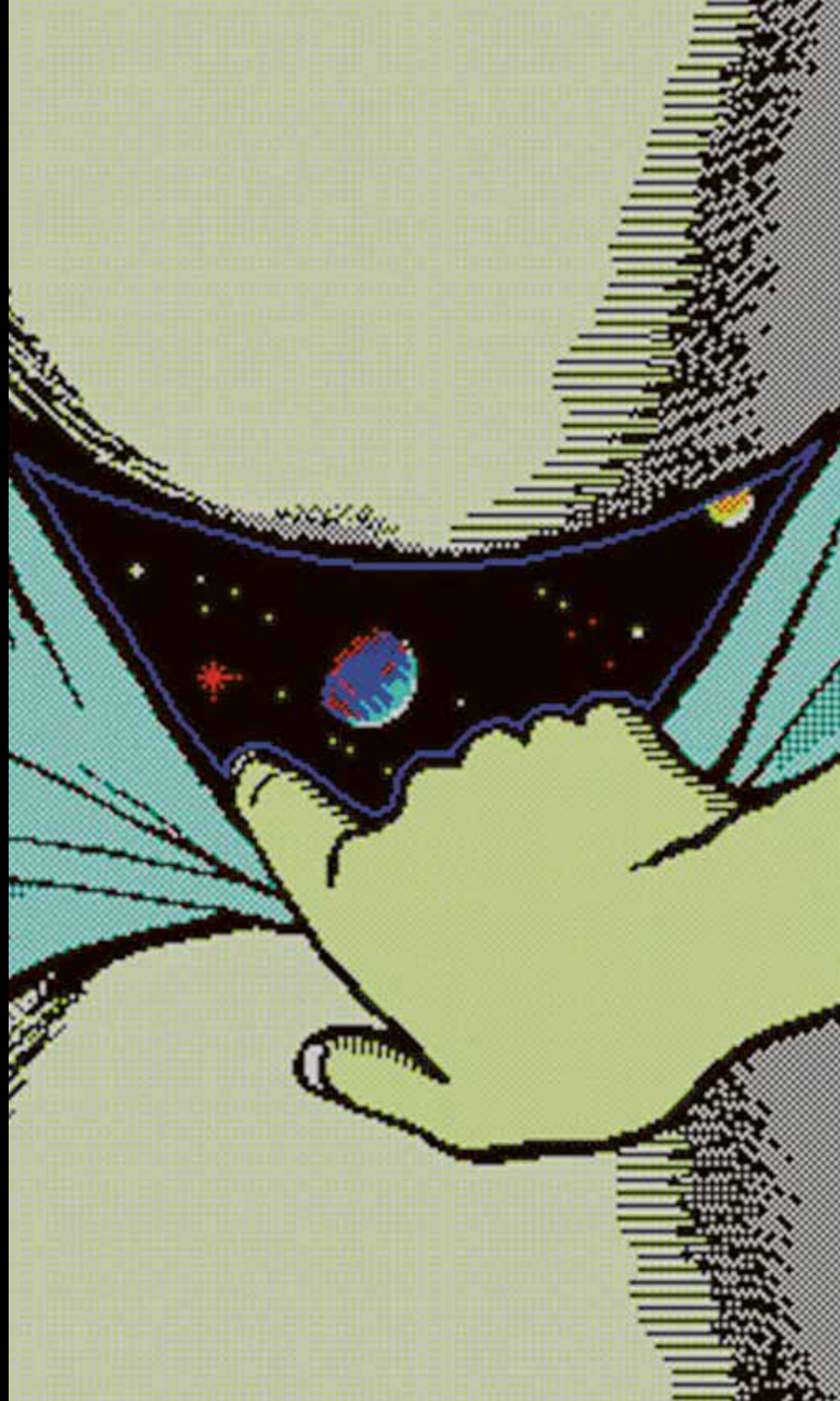
SECRET











Still Life (Betamale) was notable for having debuted on 4chan, and subjected to the scrutiny of the very marginal internet cultures it invokes. The work begins as a slideshow of ‘troll caves’, the grease-smear and food-encrusted computer rigs of users who spend more of their lives online than off. Self-mockingly grotesque, these setups appear to be nested in various windowless rooms, presumably their mothers’ basements. As one 4chan user wrote in response, ‘is he shit talking my shitty lifestyle?’ Such ambiguities underpin the pathos that makes *Still Life (Betamale)* so compelling – on some level, its invocations of those bleary and decrepit hours of early-morning browsing are utterly relatable to a generation fixated on the screen. As an impassive, digitally filtered female voiceover intones, ‘as you look at the screen, it is possible to believe you are gazing into eternity, you see the things that were inside you: this is the womb, the original site of the imagination...’ In what follows, we move from the grimy physicality of the battlestations into a layered digital montage in which retro gaming aesthetics, furry webcam performances and hentai in every tentacular flavour are built up into an orgasmic sprint. It all sticks together thanks to a broodingly granular soundtrack by the artist’s frequent collaborator, the electronic musician Oneohtrixpoint Never (AKA Daniel Lopatin).

It’s interesting to note how immediately dated the work feels. As it delves into the internet’s deeper and darker recesses, *Still Life (Betamale)* emerges like an archaeological report from

a transitional era, when the web became cleaner, friendlier, less romantic. After all, internet generations fall by the wayside every few years. What existed of 4chan is gone, and what remains is a bittersweet nostalgia for the */b/tard* communality and marginalised desires that Rafman crystallises here, desires which themselves pine for the hazy confectionary of legacy graphics and vaporwave sounds.

Fur, latex, cum – certain textures predominate in this smorgasbord of digital viscera, the intimate yearnings of the titular (young, white, male) ‘betamales’. A sinister yet mesmeric performer in a white anime mask (like a YouTube rendition of *Eyes Without a Face* (1960)) turns from the mirror to face the camera. The subject here is surely the screen itself: a smeared, brittle surface, a wholly insufficient vessel which – not unlike one of Rafman’s anime characters – is ruptured and overflowing, pulled past the point of repair. For me, the romantic hero of the work is the recurring video of Swampy T. Fox, a man in a full-body fox suit sinking into a pool of quicksand. As the last traces of his furry head dissolve into the dirt, I am touched not by fear but a melancholy calm.

JON RAFMAN

(b. 1981, CA) is an artist who explores technology and digital culture. He received a BA in philosophy and literature from McGill University, and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2008. He has exhibited worldwide from New Museum in New York (2012), Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2012), and most recently in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2016). His work has appeared in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, and *Frieze* magazine. Rafman is represented by Zach Feuer Gallery and lives and works in Montreal, Canada.

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(b. 1993, CH) is an artist and writer. He holds a BA from the Glasgow School of Art and an M.Phil from the University of Cambridge. A staff contributor to *Frieze* magazine, he is currently researching altruistic amoebae and the erotics of technological interfaces. Exhibitions include *PRAKSIS* at Atelier Nord X, Oslo and *Would you like help?* at Embassy Gallery, Edinburgh. He lives in the UK.