

# GLADSTONE

“Ed Atkins with Steven Zultanski at Gladstone Gallery, New York,” *Mousse*, January 4, 2024

## MOUSSE

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“Ed Atkins with Steven Zultanski” at Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2023. © Ed Atkins. Courtesy: the artist and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: David Regen

Gladstone is pleased to present an exhibition of new works by British artist Ed Atkins. The dual-venue installation is mounted in our 21st and 64th Street locations and marks the artist's first New York show with the gallery. Known for creating videos in which computer-animated proxies reflect on themes of loss, intimacy, abjection and melancholy, the artist's multidisciplinary approach to artmaking examines the increasingly permeable boundaries that separate life from its digital simulations. Addressing contemporary culture's fetish for media that painstakingly mimics the aesthetic contours of reality but fails to accommodate the burden of its subject, Atkins mines performance, theater, cinema, literature, and himself to examine the alive/dead dichotomy that ricochets between all bodies and their cybernated doppelgangers. A new booklet featuring an excerpt of the artist's recent writings accompanies the exhibition.

Premiering at 21st street is *Pianowork 2*, a new computer-generated animation that depicts the artist playing Jürg Frey's piano composition, *Klavierstück 2*. Realized via a motion capture process that translated Atkins' real-time performance into a hyper-realistic 3D digital model, the video is charged with the task of maintaining its self-aware artificiality while also remaining faithful to the event it resuscitates. Eschewing his typical preference for generic digital surrogates and choosing instead to animate a model with his own likeness, the artist unmask himself under the skin of a new avatar that edges incrementally closer to "Ed Atkins," but inevitably misses its mark. Captured in a single 20-minute performance, the film is a recursive compendium of duff chords, anxious grimaces, and phobic uncertainty. Though each failure is rendered in high-definition detail that suffuses Atkins' digital effigy with something familiarly human, the figure consistently exposes its own artifice. Running parallel to the insufficiencies of Atkins' performance are the video's own intentional technological shortcomings; here the real and the virtual shadow one another, becoming twinned models of inadequacy that unfold in alternate dimensions. Like the ventriloquist's dummy, the artist's double is fraught with the disorienting contradictions inherent to the uncanny; imbued with a surplus of artificial life, it cannot help but indicate death.

Shown in concert with *Pianowork 2* is *Sorcerer*, the cinematic adaptation of a play written and produced in collaboration with writer Steven Zultanski. Documenting an uneventful evening at home among friends, *Sorcerer* examines the casual horror that often undergirds banality. Written, staged, and filmed to exploit our understanding of the structural tropes that drive sitcoms and teleplays, *Sorcerer* teases what Atkins and Zultanski refer to as a "counterintuitive realism." Though the script is constructed from transcripts of real conversations between a group of friends, the production remains formally bound to both dramaturgical strategy and televisual sleights of hand. Just as we slip in and out of believing the figure in *Pianowork 2* is a representation of the artist himself, we encounter *Sorcerer* with a series of narrative expectations that remain dissatisfied when the first act collapses into the last without climax. The film's closing scene dramatizes this intentional failure; alone at the end of the evening, one of the players sits calmly down and disassembles his face, revealing himself as a double agent who straddles the parallel constructed realities unfolding both on the stage, and in the audience.

A pair of mechanized beds conceived by Zultanski and Atkins as props for *Sorcerer* dominate the artist's 64th street exhibition. Undulating as though occupied by some nebulous unknown, the sculptures function as both trespassers and referents, material indexes of the intractable distance between performance and life. Further activating the connection between the works in both galleries is a group of ten self-portraits rendered in colored pencil on paper. Executed in excruciating detail, these drawings formally present themselves as documentation of material reality, but like the artist's self-referential avatar, they are simply another series of Ed Atkins masks. Drawn from a perspective so close that the artist's face appears almost magnified, these works intentionally over identify with what Atkins refers to as a "slavish fidelity" to the image. Recalling the unheimlich qualities inherent to his computer-authored virtual body, these portraits probe at issues of time, aging, and the possibilities for objective truth within the realm of representation.

Also included at 64th street is *Voilà la vérité*, a short video in which Atkins reworks a single scene from Dimitri Kirasnoff's 1926 silent film *Ménilmontant*. The sequence depicts a distressed young woman who seems to be recalling the downward slope of her life while sitting on a park bench, locked in a reverie of trauma until an elderly man sits next to her and wordlessly begins to share his lunch. After Atkins digitized, colorized, and re-rendered the scene with the assistance of artificial intelligence software, he added a Foley soundtrack of naturalistic ambient sounds. Reanimated by technology, the video rejects its status as projection and gestures towards something more akin to the haunted house. The past has returned to the future, but it doesn't look quite the same. The title of the video is taken from the only discernible text in the film: the fragment of a headline visible on the newspaper in which the food is wrapped. "*Voilà la vérité*"—"This is the truth." In Atkins' world, we know that what we're seeing is never exactly the truth, but perhaps it's something even closer.

at Gladstone Gallery, New York  
until January 6, 2024