Altered states
In "NOWN," artists bend and mold reality to their liking through the use of computers

By Kurt Shaw
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In a small room on the second floor of Wood Street Galleries, Downtown, four objects — two hammers, a chair and a rotary phone — hover in front of glowing white walls.

At first, they appear to be images on a computer screen that have been dragged and dropped, pulled and pushed, as if by a virtual mouse in a graphics program, to such absurdly skewed perspectives that they become comical versions of themselves.

Then slowly, one realizes that these funny-looking, everyday objects are real, absolutely real in every sense. The pea green plastic of the phone is real. The chair is made of actual American rock maple; just like the handles of each hammer, which are made of oak and topped with heads made of cold, hard stainless steel.

Standing before them, with their comically skewed perspectives, these objects seem to oscillate between two and three dimensions. "Basically the reason that they have that phenomenological feeling is because ... what I am applying to a three-dimensional object is a two-dimensional distortion," says their creator, Robert Lazzarini.

Lazzarini is one of more than 10 artists whose work is in the exhibition, "NOWN," on view at Wood Street Galleries. Focusing solely on art that is either inspired by or created through the use of computer animation, the exhibition is a vibrant mix of works in diverse media.

The show was organized by Michelle Thrus, an independent curator from New York City, who says, "NOWN presents animation as not the unreal, but rather as the realization of our perception of time, space, and identity through today's advanced technologies."

To that end, Lazzarini's objects are a stunning example. Torn from their original context through the use of a 3D laser scanner, these hammers, phone and chair have been catapulted into cyberspace, where Lazzarini then altered their perspectives in a 3D graphics program. Then, using rapid prototyping — a kind of computer-generated model making — the objects were reconstructed into their new forms via 3-D models that were used to make the sculptures.

Viewing the finished results requires a constant readjustment on the part of the viewer, generating a quiet, incomprehensible shock. All at once, they are things that are familiar yet remarkably foreign, even unsettling.

"You approach them on a two-dimensional plane," Thrus says. "Then you can go around them because they are real objects."

From there, the remaining works in the exhibition explore more digital realities.

With early Nintendo hardware and a cartridge of the computer game "Hogan's Alley," Cory Arcangel has created his own version of a "pop" gun by literally hacking into the game's cartridge. With his new hardware in place, he altered the characters in the shoot-em-up carnival style game to look like the pope, Col. Sanders, Flavor Flav and the real king of pop, Andy Warhol.

Milos Manetas also used a classic computer game as inspiration, but instead he has chosen scenes from "Doom" to create single still images of "landscapes" from the digital world depicted in the game. Somewhat similarly, Yael Kanarek created an entire world of landscapes in cyberspace she calls the "World of Ave."

In the exhibition, three large still images of that environment have been hung in the gallery's real space, complete with Kanarek's handwritten script that identifies the ISPs addresses and locations of several Web surfers who actually visited her cyber world.

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