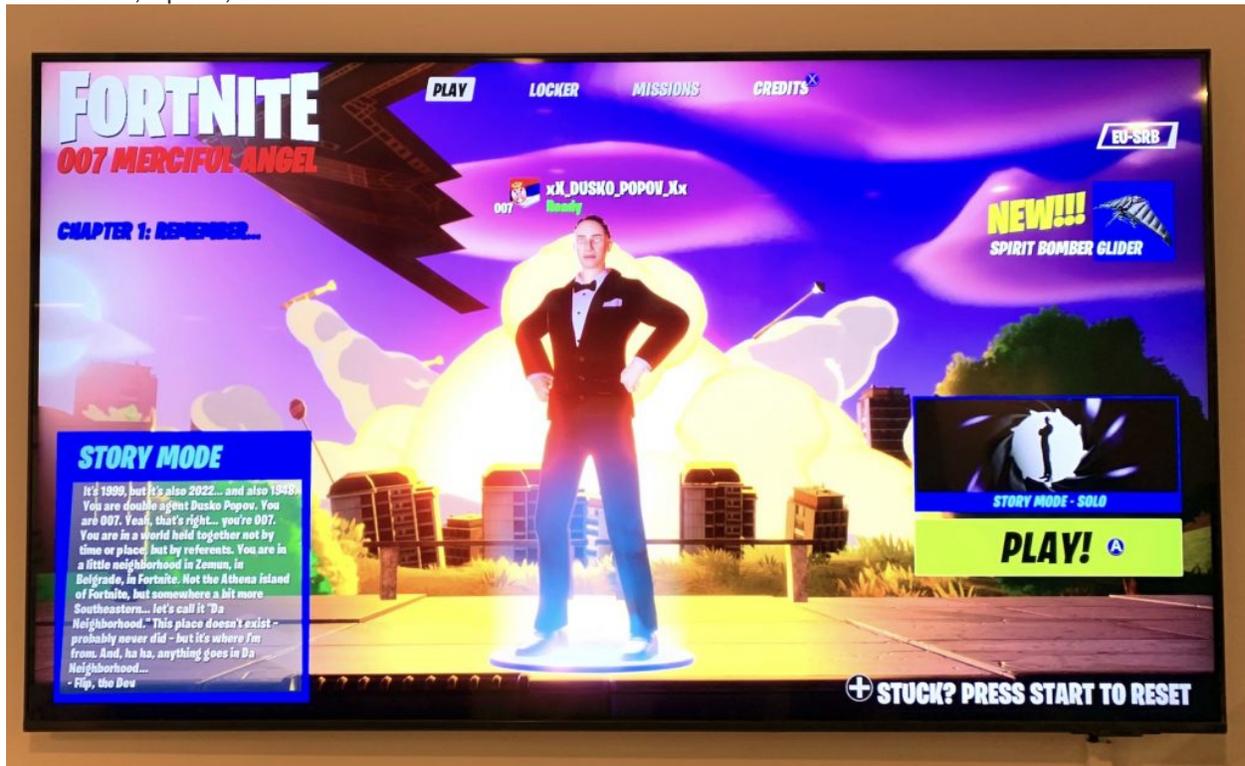


# What I'm Looking at: Racy Paper-Cuts From China, a Video-Essay Takedown of Decentraland, and Other Stuff at the Edge of Art

Highlights from New York galleries from the last few weeks.

Ben Davis, April 4, 2023



Work by Filip Kostic in the "Manic American Humanist Show." Photo by Ben Davis.

Here's my round-up of things I saw or read that were new or notable in the last month.

Tech's impact on creativity continued to be the big, panicky topic of conversation everywhere, to the point of overload. Just on the level of the discourse, A.I. looms so large that I feel myself repulsed by the subject.

Generative A.I. is already producing such a flood of meaningless visual junk and paranoia that I can feel, in the background of my mind, a new gnawing sense of rooting around for solid meaning. The value of anything connected to an actual history or a sense of place feels like it just went up a notch to me. Family heirlooms, local lore, traditional knowledge, lived-in connection, all of that.

This is all a bit of an aside (I already have a chapter on A.I. Aesthetics and the value of context in my last book, and I *am* working on trying to say something new for an essay). But I bring it up here because the background might highlight common threads connecting some of the interests I pick out below—from the appeal of the joyful secret worlds of Xiyadie, made with scissors and paper, to the resonance of Decentraland’s decline to cautionary-tale status.

## WHAT I’M LOOKING AT



Installation view of “Xiyadie: Queer Cut Utopias” at the Drawing Center. Photo by Ben Davis.

### **“Xiyadie: Queer Cut Utopias” at Drawing Center**

The self-taught artist Xiyadie (a pseudonym which means “Siberian Butterfly”) is a master of Chinese paper-cut art—a fascinating subject all on its own. The 30-odd works here, made in private since the 1980s, deploy that traditional craft to carve out intricate, lovingly detailed scenes of gay trysts and enchanted orgies, fantasies that, we are told, can’t openly be explored in the community where he lives. Bodies mingle

together with each other and merge plant-life and dragons and ornaments, in compositions that feel as delicate as snowflakes and as carefully constructed as friezes.

**The Verdict:** The kind of show that feels both like a secret to defend and a cause to evangelize to everyone you know.



The opening “Manic American Humanist Show” at Public Works Administration. Photo by Ben Davis.

### **“The Manic American Humanist Show” at Public Works Administration**

Public Works Administration is a fascinating thing: a hole-in-the-wall gallery located improbably in the 50th street 1 stop on the subway, a stone’s throw from the Disney-fied tourist nexus of Times Square. The contextual whiplash works beautifully for this show of disorienting work, curated by Abbey Pusz of the fertile web-culture collective Do Not Research, and featuring four members of the group: Tomi Faison, Filip Kostic, Emma Murray, and Holly Oliver. If I just told you the media in the show

included *Fornite* game mods (Filip Kostic), eerily melting A.I.-generated anime (Tomi Faison), Google spreadsheets (Holly Oliver), and bumper-sticker slogans printed on a mirrored obelisk (Emma Murray), it wouldn't give you a sense of how intimate and funny and unsettling the show really is.

**The Verdict:** Move over Dimes Square, Times Square is where the cool kids are at!!



Barbara Ess, *Girl in Corner* (1997-98). Photo by Ben Davis.

### **“Barbara Ess: Inside Out” at Magenta Plains**

Ess's art here, made in the 1980s and 1990s using her signature homemade pinhole camera, gave us photos with a recognizable look, fish-eyed and woozy. The specific scenes she captured balance a sense of off-handed reality and metaphorical tension: a little girl in a fort of sheets; a couple kissing in the street; a women having just dropped something on the kitchen floor. An Ess image makes you feel as if you are being seized by a suddenly surfaced memory, but the way a real memory really

appears to you: not as a crystal-clear visual document, but as something that surges temporarily into the mind, full of half-articulated emotions and spectral context.

**The Verdict:** I hadn't actually seen Ess's photos before (she died two years ago). Now that I have, I feel like I have been playing with an art-history deck missing one card all along.

## OTHER THINGS ON MY MIND

I've had a lot of fun arguing recently about the merits of *Magic Spot*. I found it through Justin Decloux and Will Sloan's *Important Cinema Club* podcast, which voted it their favorite movie of last year. It's a tale of small-town New Hampshire denizens who discover a magic rock in the woods that lets them time travel. If you saw it cold, you'd probably understand it as the film equivalent of a community theater production, a sweet, minor story, full of unabashedly amateur acting from a cast of players who feel like friends (they are—it's part of a long-running series of ultra-low budget films from Motern Media).

At the same time, *Magic Spot* can also be valued as a kind of art project about the value of ultra-local creativity. Not having followed these filmmakers like Decloux and Sloan, I maybe don't find it as intuitively enchanting as they do. But the more I think about it, the more I appreciate how coherent *Magic Spot* is as a statement: every seemingly goofy and ramshackle element of the story neatly lines up to make a very sincere and fully developed point.

The comedy is about how a local public-access TV host discovers a magical way to do something with world-altering possibilities—time travel—then puts it to very low-stakes ends: to go back in time and figure out what his girlfriend was wearing on a specific day, as a way to impress her and convince her not to leave their small town for the “big city.”

The way I see it, allegorically, it's about remembering the value of movie-making as a kind of magic that can hold communities of friends together. And it's about how really drilling down into these hyper-local values, and appreciating them, you find something that the “big city” of industrial filmmaking can't replace.

Not every film, even ones that are really profound or really cool, has an effect so activating. Maybe I'm just a sucker for a good back story. *Magic Spot* made me want to round up a bunch of buddies to do my own just-because art project.

### **“The Future is a Dead Mall,” *Folding Ideas***

From Dan Olson, the YouTube video essayist whose broadside against the NFT scene, “[Line Goes Up](#),” made waves last year, this is a pretty satisfying takedown of Decentraland, the crypto-powered online world that was the subject of breathless hype not so long ago. I was always pretty sure these kinds of worlds were not good for art (see [my review](#) of the B.20 Museum dedicated to Beeple), and Olson relentlessly catalogs the off-putting landscape Decentraland has become, full of abandoned corporate P.R. stunts, icky cartoons, and half-baked schemes (the video’s section on the evolution of the *Decentraland Report*, an in-universe media company which has received a quarter-million dollars in investment, is particularly scathing).

It’s more than just amusing, though, in that it makes viscerally clear an argument about exactly why the pitch for Decentraland as “the next stage of the internet” never made coherent sense, even for the marketers who were most eager to hop on the hype. Compared to other ways to get the word out, listing info about what you are up to on the internet or on social media really *does* streamline things for businesses, and for their potential consumers; by contrast, setting up shop in the blockchain-powered cartoon-scape of Decentraland adds huge layers of wonky complexity for no clear reason, and so far, no clear reward.

The only optimistic thing you could say is that Decentraland’s “digital dead mall” vibe is *so* bleak that it may become, like real dead malls, an object for some artist mining a [Robert Smithson-esque](#) ruin-porn vibe.

<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/xiyadie-manic-american-humanist-show-barbara-ess-magic-spot-decentraland-2278941>