

Analog, digital mysteries show their face

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An opposite situation is found in Oliver Smith's double-screen digital-analog transfer of excerpts from porn films. Gess' composition, sampled from art history, has its erotic moments. Smith's, by design, doesn't. Smith is exploring what theoreticians like to call "the gaze" so his edited clips consist entirely of closeups of faces looking, or not looking, at the camera. Female porn actors look straight at the viewer; male actors look, uh, elsewhere. That speaks volumes about how porn makers cater to viewers' fantasy.

However, Smith transforms his clips to address issues of digital-and-analog technology, and the back-and-forth transfers make porn's revealing moments not just grainy or pixelated but almost unrecognizable. You can barely tell it's a face, much less male or female, and this gets in the way of his sociological insights. Yet it also confers seriousness on a topic that could easily turn comic. Gess and Smith also plumb further analog and digital mysteries - Gess in edits of the flicker of "television tuned to a dead channel" (to quote a once-famous phrase by sci-fi writer William Gibson), Smith in creative recombinations of clips from an ancient educational film about how television works.

The show is united not just by its underlying theories but by serendipitous moments in which an image in one of Smith's productions echoes a face in a Xie painting or one of Gess' borrowed Victorians. Art (or even porn) continues to use old compositional to deliver a visual kick.