Where Men Can Live: Erin Calla Watson

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Web 2.0 has been a conspirator's dream: what it gave us in social connectivity, it's taken back in vigilance and personal data mining. It's also been a curious engine for alienation, prying open access to one another with few, negligible conditions, even if many of us are sitting all alone at home in front of our screens.

Reddit launched in 2005, and it continues as a leader in asserting the core values of Web 2.0. The euphemistically classified "discussion website" is still one of the most-visited sites in the world. Its user-generated and -moderated community boards, or subreddits; plain UX design that appears original to the company's dorm-room beginnings; and upward- and downward-facing arrows (for "upvoting" and "downvoting," directives in encouraging or discouraging the posting of the content in question); and silly little orange avatar all encourage participation and spirited debate within everyone's own chosen internet. Its virtual mixers have provided meeting spaces for nodes of the US far right, overnight GameStop speculators, copypastas, sleep-deprived new parents, and those tired of wondering to themselves, "Am I the Asshole?" Within the threats to both democracy and masculinity that Reddit seems made for indexing, Los Angeles artist Erin Calla Watson has set her focus on the subreddit r/MaleLivingSpace. Subtitled "Where Men Can Live," the chat room offers a safe space for 1.5 million men to converse—away from the usually woman-dominated online realm of homemaking—about décor, domesticity, and self-expression as well as a larger modern world that has, if you believe the MSM (the disdained mainstream media), led men into an era of crisis. Within the confines of r/MaleLivingSpace, men share photos of their homes, often from their first time living on their own, and assure one another that sports memorabilia, oversized nylon flags, neat gaming consoles, and unnaturally gray wood furniture is not "too feminine." Given the incel and militia chatter we have come to expect from young-male-dominated online platforms, the sometimes boastful, sometimes demure posts here seem sweet and well-intentioned.

Calla Watson archives these rooms by taking them offline. For *KYLE*, her 2022 solo exhibition at Los Angeles's Larder gallery, she printed illusionistic 3D renderings of rooms onto aluminum sheets, which reflect sunlight at some angles to appear solarized, and threw in the occasional shadow projection of objects of desire: anime girlfriends, curvy women, towering cowboys. Like the greenish glow of a computer screen as the sole light source in a dark room, the ghostly sheen on the slightly reflective material of the final product reveals a little of the surveillance mechanisms that make Web 2.0 so sticky—an endless maze of two-way mirrors harvesting loads of our personal data with every single click and login.

The cynical utility of it is so deeply embedded that it nearly obscures the relative innocence of r/MaleLivingSpace users' intentions.

The titular Kyle is the archetypal male in the "manosphere" that r/MaleLivingSpace anchors. He is youngish, white, living in the suburbs, and possibly nearing the end of his rope. Kyle sinks deeper and deeper into the darkness of the Web; Kyle is embittered by the world he now has to operate in and finds the sources of his disillusionments in subreddits and new -chans. This isn't the world he was promised, and he wants to get to the bottom of it, to find out why it isn't so. The prints in *KYLE* were displayed in a simulation of the subject matter itself: installed along absolutely bare white walls in the sparely appointed, beige-carpeted apartment gallery, its only other adornment a row of gold painted "Calvins"—the mischievous naughty-little-boy cartoon character often seen urinating over bumper stickers with loftier messaging—bordering the crown moldings of the rooms.

These layered imaginary homes reveal our morbid fascination with—and dissection of—characters, whether invented, celebrity, or ourselves, online. In *At Land*, a 2022 group show at Foxy Production in New York, where the artist is set to have a solo exhibition in fall 2023, Calla Watson showed creepy cutouts of perennial cowboy John Wayne and DC Comics' Harley Quinn living in more flat beige rooms. Inverting the lens away from herself and onto the projections we share and build together online, her bugged footage is a safety mirror angled to show us something we thought we were successfully hiding.



117 Erin Calla Watson, *Goodnight Bambi*, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Foxy Production, New York. Photo: Aurélien Mole

118 119 (From left to right) Erin Calla Watson, *Goodnight Room*, 2022; *Goodnight Donnie*, 2022. Foxy Production at Paris Internationale, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Foxy Production, New York. Photo: Aurélien Mole

120 121 Erin Calla Watson, *John Wayne Alone*, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Foxy Production, New York. Photo: Charles Benton





