

THE ENVOY

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Be Right Back

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Thomas Hunter Project exhibit takes on the internet

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Continuing to display work quietly in the basement, Thomas Hunter Projects installed a massive new piece by Matthew Garrison at the start of the semester titled “Be Right Back.” With a name inspired from the internet acronym, “BRB,” the installation attempts to visualize and embody the internet. The work covers an entire wall of the Thomas Hunter Project room with 837 webcam shots of empty rooms that resemble an overwhelming collage of colored walls and random furniture pieces when viewed as a whole. Up close though, the empty rooms showcase eccentricities and personalized modes of living. The collage accurately communicates the duality of comforting and unsettling vibes that one often encounters while surfing the web.

Matthew Garrison began developing his idea for “BRB” nine months ago, after being approached by the Hunter College art department about displaying his work in the Thomas Hunter Project’s room. An artist who’s claimed to be interested in social networking and in traversing the space between analog and digital, Garrison spent hours sifting through webcam chat sites to take hundreds of screenshots of empty rooms. Garrison’s project avoids making grandiose statements about what the internet means for people. The project is less of a commentary on how the internet affects the world than it is a focus on distilling the experience of socializing on the web. Removed from the internet realm, the images turn increasingly compelling.

Up close, the pictures manage to humanize a generation of internet users who are often derided for being impersonal and remaining in anonymity. Through collecting such a large number of images, Garrison shows a wide diversity in the customization of households that also manage to carry an overarching similarity. Regardless of how each room’s been customized, the images depicted are just of people’s homes—simple bedrooms, kitchens and living rooms.

It is interesting to look at the more decorated rooms where posters are taped onto walls, or books and records are stacked on shelves. One room is painted to resemble Van Gogh's iconic artwork, *The Starry Night*, while other rooms feature bright bedsheets, dainty decorations and dolls that allude to the presence of children. However, even the personalized items from each room do not appear much different from one another; the pop cultural items and even colors carry a similar theme from room to room. The actual content covering these spaces is unimportant, and "Be Right Back" warmly highlights the commonalities of people wanting to connect with others and make their personal spaces comfortable for themselves.

The anonymity of the pictures still captures a lingering creepy vibe that can arise while using social networking sites. The empty rooms are only surface-level insights to who those people are—the physical equivalent of a constructed Facebook profile. The room displays are loaded with signifiers of what each user would like to convey about their personalities, but what is tucked in the drawers and under mattresses remains hidden. Most importantly, the users themselves are out of sight. The cutesy bedroom with undone pink quilts can belong to anyone, including someone trying to prey on people who'd like to meet that made-up teenage girl.

Garrison's other piece in the same room, titled "Friends," is a deceptively personal and more pleasant work. Inside a blue screen, tiny pictures are lined on top of each other and a light focuses on one picture at a time with random quotes slowly flashing at the bottom. "An animated light box," Garrison calls it. The lines read much like Facebook statuses—random, declarative bits of dialogue about vacation plans, family visits, and wishing the world a good night. They are as mundane as Facebook statuses usually are. But with the context provided—those faces are actually close Facebook friends of Garrison—the work becomes much more touching than when seen on first glance. It pulls away from the underlining uneasiness present in "Be Right Back," and serves as a reminder of how powerful the internet can be for creating and maintaining relationships.

In not directly addressing the effects of the internet on the world, Garrison's work attempts a much more unique goal: nailing down the feel of internet interaction. His ambitious installation provides a subtle, warts-and-all view of internet life that smoothly avoids harsh judgment of those who do manage to connect with others through the web.

Be Right Back is located in the basement of the Thomas Hunter Building and will be on display until February 17th.