

# ARTEFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

## Cliff Evans

ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM

REVIEWS

For this show, his recent solo museum debut, Brooklyn- and Boston-based artist Cliff Evans projected a five-channel video onto a twenty-foot-long, seven-foot-high arrangement of five segmented panels to make *Empyrean*, 2007 (the title evoking the pure light of heaven). Evans was in residence at the institution in 2006; afterward he crafted the work by combining more than ten thousand images drawn from governmental, corporate, military, commercial, and pop-cultural websites to illustrate a set of loose imaginative narratives. The artist, who considers the Web to be his collaborator, downloads, manipulates, and blends still images and video footage, subsequently animating the results. Recurrent representations of people (both famous and unknown), orange groves, poppies, Apache helicopters, oil rigs, guns, skulls, and soldiers glide across the panels, their movement evoking



Cliff Evans,  
*Empyrean*, 2007,  
color video,  
6 minutes.  
Installation view.

Terry Gilliam's *Monty Python* animations. *Empyrean*'s searing aesthetic casts a critical eye on the industrialized world and its drive for economic and cultural globalization.

*Empyrean* presents us with an empire of decadence and destruction in which stereotypical desert landscapes, from Las Vegas to Palestine, are confused and conflated. Evans's multi-part screen displays several separate but related narratives. An opening sequence projected across the central panels is

introduced by a version of the theme from David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). Here we see "Brangelina" ride a crudely animated camel across sand dunes. Brad holds a skull and Angelina carries the blue standard of the United Nations, as onlookers shoot photos of the superstars without noticing the young Iraqi and Afghani boys and girls emerging behind them. As the couple fades out of sight, the sound of air horns, mixed with that of an Arabic flute, introduces a second sequence. Florida condos collide with Beirut hillside settlements, as images of St. Peter's Basilica, the US Capitol, the Dome of the Rock, and the New Orleans Superdome peek through. Yet a third simulated desert scene is set in a retreat populated by nubile guests; a boisterous, apocalyptic beast eventually interrupts their tranquility. The fourth and final desert scene presents a conglomerate of the Israel-Palestine Separation Wall, the US/Mexico border wall, the Peace Wall in Belgrade, and the Green Zone wall in Iraq, guarded by a buxom, costumed model. After a shot of 7-Eleven and "USA-bucks" signs, the video comes to an end, to the rumble of drums.

Evans's simulacrum of life from a young American male's laptop-bound perspective is utterly contemporary but also, in its heightened color and ethical message, recalls Northern Renaissance paintings of the Last Judgment. The work's multiple-panel support purposely mimics the traditional altarpiece, with its central triptych, two wing panels, and predella. Specifically, *Empyrean* pays homage to Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, ca. 1503–04. In a bizarre and timely allusion to the left-hand panel of Bosch's triptych, in which God introduces Adam to Eve, Evans introduces images of Adam and Eve mannequins (posed among hungry dinosaurs) into the left-hand part of the projection, thereby taking a shot at the lately revived controversy around Creationism. In combining eccentric mystical and religious imagery with social criticism, Evans questions our superficial pleasures by mirroring them in a wildly entertaining style.

—Francine Koslow Miller