

These Artful Machines Don't Do Anything

By Emerson Rosenthal
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Series A (Detail). Powder coated steel, aluminum, transparent LDC display, LEDs, custom electronics, laser-cut acrylic, glass, resin, pigment, gypsum 3D prints, backlit Duratrans, LED displays, servo, micro controllers, custom pedestal, related electronics. 46 x 42 x 82 inches (116.8 x 106.7 x 208.3 cm). Photographs by Andrew Belcof, Courtesy Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco.

TIME may remember him as one of the [Top 10 Crooked CEOs](#), but a look into the unconventional investor-wooing methods of WorldCom co-founder Bernie Ebbers—Ebbers offered office tours through immense data centers where arrays computers blinked and whirred with completely false data—offers a timely and important window into [CLOUDS](#), the new exhibition from graffiti artist-turned-fine artist [Yorgo Alexopoulos](#), who in the past put [cosmic animations on billboards in Times Square](#), and whose 2.5D animation techniques were the subject of a [2013 documentary by The Creators Project](#), at San Francisco's [Gallery Wendi Norris](#).

Ebbers' made-up machines, like those aboard the starship Enterprise, existed for sheer dramatic effect: they looked like they were doing something that you didn't understand, which made them feel important. Likewise, Alexopoulos' three sculptures that comprise *CLOUDS* don't actually do anything. The seven-foot-tall pieces are flashing, blinking monoliths that resemble servers. Electricity pulses through their circuits to no productive end; the numbers being crunched inside are, for lack of a better word, imaginary. For all intents and purposes,

to anyone who didn't know they were in an gallery, or who hadn't seen the intricate images on the video screens on the backs of them, they are. And that's the point:



Series A, CLOUD 002 – Series A, CLOUD 003 – Series A. Powder coated steel, aluminum, transparent LDC display, LEDs, custom electronics, laser-cut acrylic, glass, resin, pigment, gypsum 3D prints, backlit Duratrans, LED displays, servo, micro controllers, custom pedestal, related electronics. 46 x 42 x 82 inches (116.8 x 106.7 x 208.3 cm)

"The works are meant to deceive the viewer into trusting that complex operations are being performed, when in actuality the data is fake and the intrigue purely visual," explains the show's press release. "In reality, they only threaten to function, revealing something mysterious, almost sinister, in the discrepancy between their appearance and their purpose. What do these machines actually do?"

Ultimately, it's in the video dioramas on the backside of each sculpture that the allegorical nature of these Very Serious Machines comes to light. Each depicts an age-old story, like that of David and Goliath, juxtaposing the objects against an effect "much like a political cartoon, presenting expansive cultural commentary within a single frame." It's fiction, but sometimes stories can feel more real than the truth.

Many of today's science fiction films eschew the sculptural gizmos and doo-dads of yesteryear, opting instead for computer-generated visuals based on real user-interface and haptic research. With *CLOUDS*, as with Ebberts' facsimile data farms, Alexopoulos hearkens back to a simpler time in which the combination of size, shape, and flashing lights was enough to instill in onlookers the exciting, intrepid feeling of the future.

