Bit girl

Words by Sophy Grimshaw

In online art Petra Cortright is one of the art world's best established practitioners. Yet will she reach beyond the net? Of course, she tells Sophy Grimshaw

"I have to say that the internet really worked out for me as a female, as an introvert," says the US artist Petra Cortright. "It allowed me to compete in a removed but very aggressive way."

In contemporary art's post-internet era, it's not just the Justin Biebers and Zoellas of the world who have built their public profiles via YouTube. Cortright's online channel is a repository for her lo-fi, selfie videos, with cartoon effects and generic titles like *Bridal Shower*. But all is not as naive as it seems, and hers is a reality that quickly becomes warped and glitchy.

"I feel like I really excelled in the early environment of the internet, about 10 to 15 years ago. It was a great time to start out," Cortright explains. "It's changed a lot, and it feels more crowded and censored and homogenised. It's harder for me to give advice to younger people now who ask about how I was able to pull through."

Since first turning to her webcam in 2007 during her studies at Parsons New School of Design, the now 30-year-old LA native has been the subject of solo shows, gained the representation of New York's Foxy Production gallery, and – in an example of the melding of art and high fashion commerce that feels quite natural to millennials – created clips in which she models clothes for Stella McCartney.

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How does the artist view those unusual videos for McCartney – a sort of "digital modelling" where, once on Cortright's body, garments are seen to blur, change colour or catch fire? "It was a fairytale; she found me on the internet," Cortright says of the designer. "I can't believe it myself, but I'm really glad she did. It's been so much fun to work with her."

In 2015 ARTinfo called Cortright the "poster child for a group of fashion-conscious, web-savvy artists". By May this year, in a frankly off-putting comparison that recalls the "Eminem is the new Shakespeare" hype, *Artsy* magazine ran the headline "Petra Cortright is the Monet of the 21st century".

Cortright has never claimed to be Monet, but beyond the YouTube clips that both echo and subvert the web's appetite for vanity video, it's true that there's a firmly painterly aspect to her practice.

Her digital "paintings" in fact comprise hundreds of Photoshopped layers of found online material, and do, in some sense, possess Impressionist qualities. She creates these during marathon sessions wearing tinted gamer glasses – designed for and marketed towards dedicated games console geeks – to protect her eyesight as she works at her desktop. The finished paintings are then printed (on a variety of surfaces, but usually aluminium), which allows them to be hung like conventional art objects – and potentially encountered by audiences beyond internet art's usual reach.

Perhaps Cortright's strongest works, though, have been gallery installations which re-contextualise "Virtuagirls". Available online, these are stripper animations based on motion capture of real women, which can be downloaded to strut endlessly around a user's desktop. Cortright rehomed some in fantastic new unicorn-populated wallpaper locations, and isolated others against green screen. The results are rather spooky, and unexpectedly affecting.

"There are classical things that I love, landscapes and portraits, and essentially the work can be boiled down to those focuses," Cortright says. "I love trying to create a new world. The act of making art is somewhat of an escape for me, but also somewhat finding a truth as well. They happen simultaneously."

Does she think the internet's democratisation of the means of production can help women makers in a still male-dominated art world? "A lot of my peers that I came up with were guys, but I felt like I could really compete and it was not a problem for me because I was in the kingdom of my bedroom and I had control and nobody was around to bug me," she says. "I would like to think that the internet has opened more doors for women, but I have to say, it's also a rough place to be a woman and always has been, so… I dunno."

Cortright is married to artist Marc Horowitz, her longtime partner with whom she shares a birthday; on 19 July this year they threw a "70th birthday" celebration when she turned 30 and he turned 40. Back when he was single, *People* magazine even bemusingly deemed Horowitz worthy of its 50 Most Eligible Bachelors index, not a list normally teeming with contemporary art names. Cortright's Instagram shows the couple hanging out in sunny locales and on yachts, as well as shots of her with Stella McCartney, legendary pop artist Ed Ruscha and a parade of cute pet dogs. If it seems like a charmed life at the top of the heap of our drag-and-drop culture, Cortright is keen to point out that her success grew out of hard work and, initially, low self-esteem.

"Making my work was a way for me to deal with all my other life failures for a long time," she says. "I didn't have a job and had dropped out of school and all that. I failed at everything else except making the work that I was making at that time, which didn't feel so great then but it has paid off now. I really did put a lot of time into my work, which, looking back, has been the key to success for me, to just work like a total maniac. If you just make so much work, at some point people can't ignore you."

Rather than a dedicated "net art" genre, I ask if she thinks that online work will eventually become just one more option in any multidisciplinary artist's arsenal? "Yes," she tells me, "Of course." Until then, she remains post-internet art's queen bee.

Left: let's go+kick.rom, Petra Cortright. 2015
Digital painting, Duraflex, 3D print, UV print and stickers, mounted on acrylic , 49 x 42 x 1 in

Above: i feel u, Petra Cortright. 2015
Webcam video, dimensions variable, 1 min 46 sec