Nate Boyce: Polyscroll
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

Nate Boyce is known for his hybrid sculpture-video works, which use slick three-dimensional, skeletal structures to support flat screens (sometimes from edge to edge with opaque, muted colors. The San Francisco-based artist’s recent solo exhibition, Polyscroll (January 23–April 5, 2015), paired an abstractionism reminiscent of Willem de Kooning’s with futuristic forms that mimicked the bone and musculature of alien creatures from science fiction films or otherworldly video games. These sculptural elements, which appeared in both the main gallery of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts’ YBCA upper level, and affixed to the white metal industrial railings along the space’s hallways and staircases, are a clear nod to the late artist and set designer H.R. Giger (of Alien fame)—celebrating a post-apocalyptic aesthetic still current in the design lexicon of the fetish industry, its jewelry, accessories, and binding appendages. Unlike Giger’s metallic, dark color palette, however, Boyce’s is cool, with tempered grey-blues, dusky beiges, sallow yellows reminiscent of the dull light of a dentist’s office, and earthy putty hues. His textural schema is similarly attenuated; a certain flatness dominates his plastic and fabricated surfaces. As such, Polyscroll made a fitting contribution to YBCA assistant curator Ceci Mos’s exhibition series, Control: Technology in Culture. The show imposes a curious discipline upon the typically flashy vernacular of science fiction, or the performative, though nuanced, metal-and-leather-clad cultures of BEGIM.

Coupled with the slow, methodical pace of the exhibition, these works indoctrinated viewers with a hypnotic rhythm, broadcast through the large-format screens hung vertically on the walls, playing Boyce’s digital paintings, the contents of which constantly move, or scroll. This “scrolling” is about more than what is implicit, in the exhibition title. Continuous input—linguistic, visual, or otherwise—moving gradually upward, originating as if from nowhere at the bottom of a frame and disappearing into its summit, ad infinitum, is now an essential part of our mode of processing information. We scroll through practically everything of substance in our lives; most things of importance are in one way or another visually captured and essentialized for a framework that fits comfortably within our hands, or rests buoyantly atop our laps. Boyce has taken that endless upward motion and filled it not with the names, dates, keywords, or images through which one would normally scroll, but instead with dense smears of color, free-flowing lines, and CGI-rendered 3-D objects resembling hooks, bones, and masks, all smashed flush against the plane of the ever-present screen.

In addition to Boyce’s videos, in which jagged, decorative sculptural elements jut against an unshackled painterly approach to colors and lines, Polyscroll presented several free-standing sculptures, whose planarity and plasticity mirror the qualities of his digital imagery. The off-kilter, geometric bases for these sculptures look like they were sourced from a medical supply discount store; shiny, metal configurations sat precariously atop them, recalling the bondage-inspired adornments that creep out of Boyce’s flashy video paintings.

The swirling and morphing of colors and shapes bolstered the mesmerizing, cyclical atmosphere in the exhibition—another return to the omnipresence of scrolling motions. Swiping our fingers across our touchscreens is an embodiment of our cycling and recycling through references. By interacting into this repetition—thus imposing the biological onto the digital, matte onto glass, static onto devices of endless motion—Boyce creates inexplicable, often intriguing transmutations.

—Courtney Malick

ABOVE: Nate Boyce, Render Cage 2, 2014, powder coated steel and airbrushed urethane, installation view at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco)