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A meditation on fidelity, in digital animation

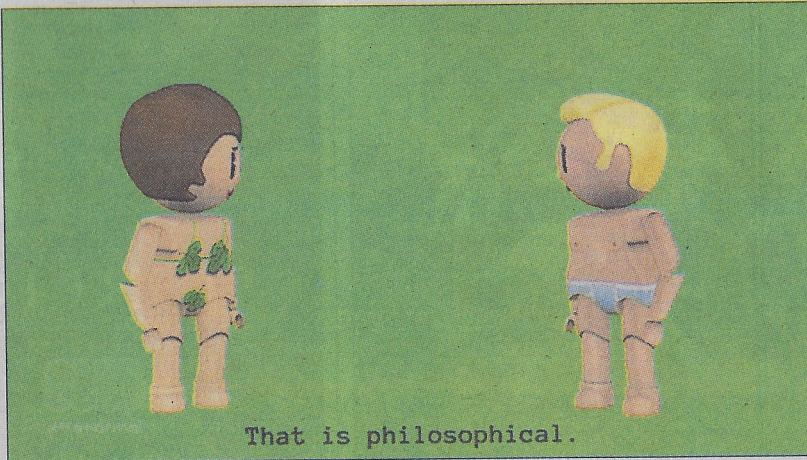
By JOHN MOTLEY

SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

"My Best Thing," Los Angeles artist Frances Stark's feature-length digital animation, would seem to be the product of frustrated ambitions. The episodic film, which debuted at the 2011 Venice Biennale and is up now at Upfor gallery in the Pearl District, is ostensibly based on the artist's virtual relations with two Italian men she met through anonymous chat rooms. But in her interactions with them, sex is frequently forgone for more cerebral pleasures, as she and her online partners spend their digital trysts discussing literature, philosophy, film and more.

Along the way, this time-wasting indulgence eclipses her interest in the paintings she knows she should be finishing and, as she wonders whether these experiences could form the basis of the work she'll present in Venice, it infiltrates her art.

The story of "My Best Thing" then, follows in the tradition of Federico Fellini's "8½," a film recommended to her by one of the men, becoming the story of an artist struggling to account for all the unwieldy complexity of life in a single, masterful art-



Film stills from Frances Stark's "My Best Thing," 2011.

work.

Stark's film is, unquestionably, masterful. But that feat registers as a minor miracle given her choice of presentation. Rather than visually depict her encounters with any modicum of realism, she represents the action using Xtranormal, a text-to-speech animation freeware that let users create "movies" by simply typing dialogue or, in Stark's case, text from chat logs.

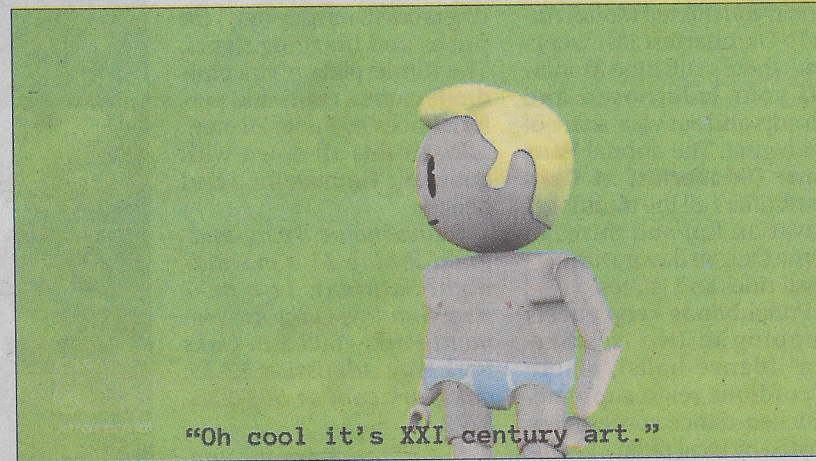
In her film, this dialogue is performed by avatars — Playmobil figures adorned in fig leaves — within a depth-

less field of bright lime green. These choices, too, are unexpected, at once comically ill-suited for such adult content and perfect for revealing Stark's perspective.

The avatars suggest these characters are as innocent as children's toys, brought to life through imagination and play, but the inclusion of fig leaves — that is, fall fashion in Eden — casts them as aware and ashamed. The background also symbolically conjures the Hollywood green screen, onto which cultural fantasies, and the root desires and anxieties that drive them, are projected.

"My Best Thing" contains multitudes, ranging from absurd to intelligent, mundane to dramatic, unguardedly pedestrian to high-brow. But at the heart of Stark's film is a meditation on fidelity. It's unobtrusively in our faces in Xtranormal's "low fidelity" production values and the ethical gray area of cam sex (the Stark character explains that she has a boyfriend, though later expresses jealousy about an online partner's activities).

Still, these seem like cues to consider what it means to be faithful to autobiographical truth and, beyond that, the



Courtesy of FRANCES STARK AND GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE, NEW YORK

ideal of artistic truth.

"My Best Thing" would seem to expose Stark, the person, down to the most private moments of her personal life, but it is also a work of art, sculpting the raw material of life into expression. In that sense, Stark's film is powered by the tension between the two. As her one of her characters remarks in the film, "I raise doubt constantly; it's my modus operandi."

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review

Frances Stark, "My Best Thing"

Where: Upfor Contemporary Art, 929 N.W. Flanders St., 503-227-5111

Hours: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays

Closes: Sept. 28

Admission: Free

Website: upforgallery.com