Game boy

## Eddo Stern plays at the art of war in a new show at Postmasters

By **Steven Stern**

Last March, the day after bombs started falling in Baghdad, the Sony Corporation quietly filed an application to trademark the phrase "Shock and Awe." The company thought the military catchphrase would make a nifty title for a new PlayStation game. When the story broke, Sony apologized for being insensitive and abruptly cancelled the project.

They needn't have been so squeamish: The crossover between real and video-game warfare is no secret. In the past year, millions of people have downloaded *America's Army,* a realistic first-person-shooter PC game available free on the Web. The game is free for the same reason it's realistic: It was created by the U.S. military as a tool for attracting new soldiers. Players train on accurate weapons and participate in simulated counterterrorist strikes. Once you get the hang of virtual firefights, you can sign up for the flesh-and-blood version with a simple mouse-click—a link on the screen connects directly to an Army recruiting office.

Eddo Stern, "GodsEye"
Postmasters, through October 18 (see Chelsea)

Eddo Stern—a young Tel Aviv–born, Los Angeles–based media artist—is clearly fascinated by such more-than-metaphorical links between fantasy and actual combat; a live-feed session of *America's Army* is featured in *Fort Palladin,* one of the hybrid sculptural objects in Stern's second solo show at Postmasters. Installed on the floor of the main gallery, the fort forms part of a futuristic medieval city. There's a cathedral, with sculpted gargoyles that bobble in time to an electronic rendition of "Whose
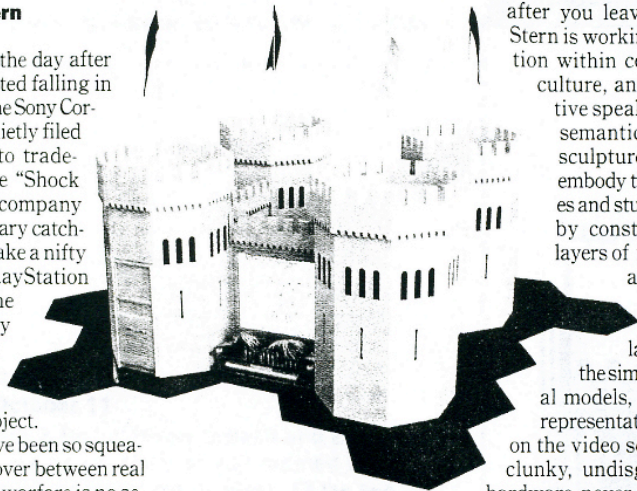
Eddo Stern, *Fort Palladin,* 2003.

Child Is This" while the lyrics stream by, karaoke-style, on a pair of screens. A windmill, yoked to a PC, spins gently as a band of pixilated armored crusaders marches to a synthesized loop of Led Zeppelin's Orientalist classic, "Kashmir." In *USS Dragoon,* three computer monitors form the runway of a magical aircraft carrier where animated dragons come in for landings. Done in the familiar neutral ivory color of computer components, the works seem like customized hardware from a high-tech Middle-Earth.

The show's title, "GodsEye," is taken from a computer gaming term, referring to a player's omniscient perspective, viewing and controlling a virtual world from above. The way-more-than-obvious religious and political connotations of this phrase are the starting points for Stern's nexus of associations. Triangulating military technology, computer-game fandom and pop-culture medievalism, these jury-rigged devices weave a web of commonalities. In this model city, the fantasy genre of brave knights and powerful sorcerers meets up with the Christian imperial ambitions of America's "crusade" in the Middle East—and the

sophisticated electronic wizardry that makes it possible.

While these linkages are witty, the least-interesting thing about Stern's work is what it's ostensibly about. Seen solely in terms of their connect-the-dots content, his sculptures are little more than illustrative, lacking a true critical kick. Yet experientially, these objects have a resonant strangeness that stays with you long after you leave the gallery. Stern is working from a position within computer-game culture, and he has a native speaker's ear for its semantic nuances. His sculptures translat and embody the weird glitches and stutters generated by constantly shifting layers of fantasy and reality. They make the viewer negotiate these layers as well— the simple architectural models, the imaginary representations portrayed on the video screens and the clunky, undisguised bits of hardware never quite join up. There's something unexpectedly unsettling about looking at these goofy, multivalent forms.

A similarly jarring experience is provided by the video *Vietnam Romance,* running in Postmasters' back room. Like Stern's earlier *Sheik Attack,* it is assembled entirely from commercial videogame sequences. A doubly mediated historical fiction, the video is a quasi-narrative structured in eight vignettes—or, more accurately, levels—which recall popular representations of the Vietnam War. Downloaded MIDI files—tinny electronic renditions of familiar songs—provide the soundtrack: A soldier crumples to the ground, over and over, accompanied by a bleeping version of "Have You Ever Seen the Rain"; ghostly helicopters circle to "Ride of the Valkyries." The scenes, set against a background of luminous animated jungles and mountains, have an oddly affecting iconic grandeur. But you're not quite sure what to do with your emotions, which seem both activated and deflected. While the dislocations Stern's work invokes and enables are derived from the niche world of computer games, they feel frighteningly general. As both Sony and the U.S. Army know, game culture is the one we all inhabit. ∎