

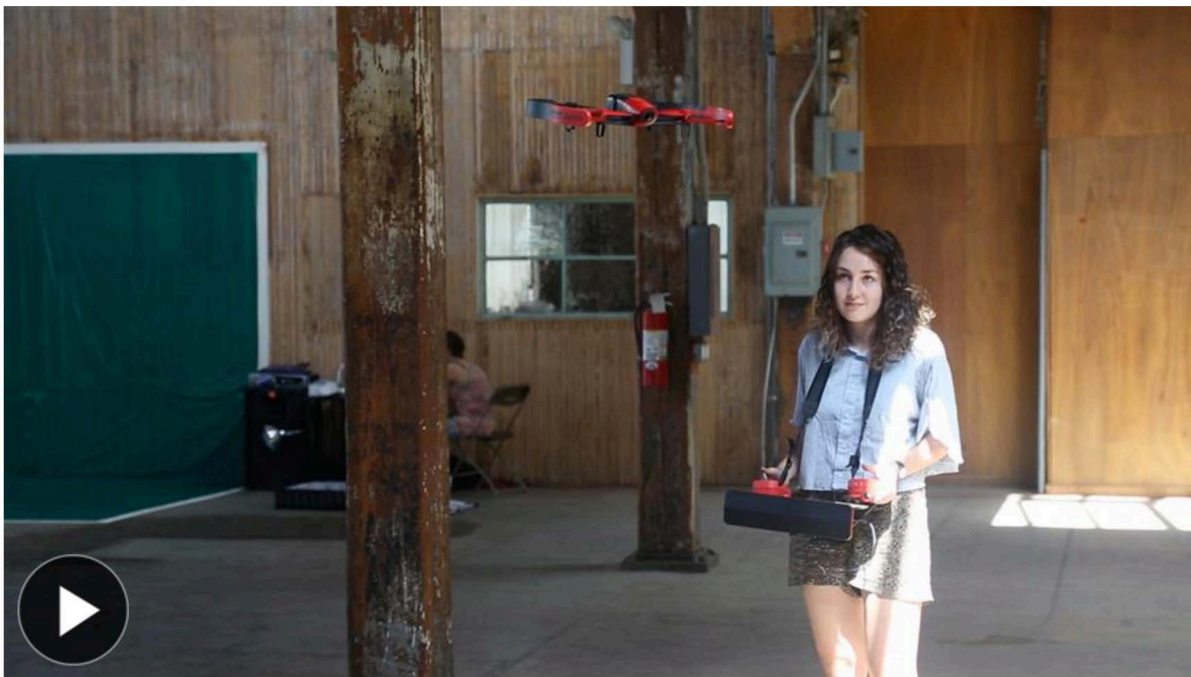
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Art, As Seen by Drones

A new exhibit lets visitors pilot the small unmanned aircraft around, and sometimes into, the art

By **VIPAL MONGA**

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A month-long exhibition at the Knockdown Center in Maspeth, Queens, lets viewers pilot drones around, and sometimes into, the art.
Photo/Video: Jennifer Weiss for The Wall Street Journal

It started as a fun idea: Invite some artists to make sculpture that can be used in a drone obstacle course. Because, secretly, who doesn't want to navigate a buzzy, remote-controlled flying craft around an art installation set in a beautiful restored factory space?

But the more organizers at the Knockdown Center, a three-year-old arts space on the border of Brooklyn and Queens, thought about it, an intriguing question arose: How do these increasingly popular "eyes in the sky" change our perception of art?

Visitors to Knockdown can explore that question firsthand starting Saturday, with the opening of "First Person View," a month-long show inviting people to pilot drones up to, around and sometimes even through a series of nine artworks, inspired by the crafts themselves.

Those who make the trek to Maspeth, where the center presents a mix of avant-garde art and performance events, will find the videos, dioramas and sculptures spread throughout its 50,000-square-foot space.

Visitors can bring their own drones, fly those the artists have provided or use one of Knockdown's two quadricopters, helicopters with four rotors. Flat-screen TVs in the space will display the machines' point of view—captured through their camera eyes—and the center's staff plans to print and display captured drone-cam images.

Michael Merck, the Knockdown Center's creative director, said he is interested in drones as a “universal symbol” for people's evolving relationship to technology. He has been feeding himself a steady diet of news about “unmanned aerial vehicles,” or UAVs, he said, and is fascinated by stories about shepherding fliers, or ones tricked out with remote-controlled handguns.



E. Adam Attia installs his piece 'Smoke and Mirrors,' part of the drone-related art show 'First Person View' at the Knockdown Center. *PHOTO: NATALIE KEYSSAR FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Visitors to Knockdown, a former glass and door factory, will be able to fly the drones up to the more than 40-foot-high ceiling. At that height, the devices will be able to fly through and around sculptor Jeff DeGolier's “chill-zone” installation, which includes a beach chair and stereo boom box hanging in the sky. The Knockdown Center describes the work as commentary on surveillance and on Amazon.com Inc.'s desire to use drones to deliver everyday items such as beach furniture directly to our doors.

Performance artist Cara Francis describes her piece as sort of “drone karaoke.” She asks

participants to stand in front of a green screen—a backdrop used in video and film that allows separate backgrounds to be superimposed later—and hold intimate conversations and dance with a UAV hovering above. She presents it as a seduction by drone.

“I’d like them to fall in love,” said Ms. Francis.

‘Drones have a really weird presence. They seem emotional.’

—Vanessa Thill, curator, “First Person View”

But, as a direct comment on the military DNA of the machines, after the performances, she will betray

that love and replace the green screen with images of drone strikes and warfare.

Matej Vakula’s plywood folding sculpture is meant to evoke the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and to allow visiting drone pilots a bird’s-eye view of the bent shapes that obliquely reference the burning and collapsing twin towers.

His work, like many of those on view, addresses drones’ association with surveillance and warfare.

Despite that violent taint, the machines are becoming an object of fascination among civilians. Consumer sales of the aircraft are booming. Drone sales could approach 700,000 this year and reach \$105 million, a 52% increase from last year, according to projections by the Consumer Electronics Association, a trade group.

And they are quickly becoming a common sight in the skies. Banned over Washington, D.C., and U.S. national parks as a public nuisance, they are being used for everything from herding sheep in New Zealand to delivering pizza in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

“Drones have a really weird presence,” said Vanessa Thill, who curated “First Person View.” “They seem emotional.”

It may have something to do with the way they fly.

Knockdown’s red Parrot Bebop drone, which Mr. Merck and the center’s Co-Director Tyler Myers have named “Socks,” is easily controlled by twin joysticks and an iPad interface. It rises to hover about 5 feet in the air with the touch of a button and then smoothly glides back and forth in response to a Wi-Fi signal from the interface. Small red lights like eyes blink on the cameras, and the machine makes a beeping sound if it crashes, which Ms. Thill likens to crying.



Performance artist Cara Francis flies her drone as she installs her piece, 'REMOTE,' in which she asks visitors to dance, and hold intimate conversations, with an unmanned craft above. *PHOTO: NATALIE KEYSSAR FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

In Knockdown's light-flooded, wood-ceilinged main hall, artists E. Adam Attia and Leo Gibbs have collaborated to create a cube covered with images of a 1950s suburban American idyll. But inside—for the drone's eyes only and distorted by literal smoke and mirrors—lies a diorama depicting a battlefield.

Mr. Attia used to create and analyze maps for the U.S. Army in Iraq. He wants people to focus on the issues of privacy and remote warfare. But even he hasn't been able to escape the drones' appeal. He bought his blue-and-white DJI Phantom drone last year and immediately took to it—although with reservations.

"I love the thing," he said. Although he refuses to name it, he concedes that something about the way the crafts move suggests a personality. Mr. Attia describes the movement as "organic" and "creepy."

"It's not an animal, but it moves like one," he said.

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