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"Faces of fascination; Photographer focuses on video gamers"

All you see are their faces. Intent focused faces with an almost angelic glow about them. There is no surroundings that differentiate them, no context to what they are doing. Each and every one is shown against a black background in a vividly crisp print.

Every portrait has something in common, some intangible feeling that each one of these boys is not a part of reality, but floating in some other world, where time and space don't quite exist. But then they are all playing video games. The light doesn't represent an angelic glow so much as the TV screen. The intent faces are not contemplating spiritual matters, but trying to win games like "Smuggler's Run 2: Hostile Territory," and "Nascar 2001."

Photographer Shauna Frischkorn's "Game Boys" exhibit, which opens Friday at the Lancaster Museum of Art and runs through March 28, is a series of portraits of boys ranging in age from 13 to 27.

Frischkorn is an assistant professor of art at Millersville University and she knew a lot of her students liked to play video games. Her inspiration for this exhibit came from the photography work of some of her students.

"I have students who do portrait assignments and I remembered that girls would often shoot their boyfriends. A lot of the time it would be a guy on a couch with a certain expression on his face. The class would say, 'Oh, that's the video game face.'"

Frischkorn began thinking about doing portraits of boys with that "face" and began thinking about how to frame them.

"I am interested in the act of viewing. I always liked the idea of something like looking at people as they watched a concert or something like that."

She wasn't interested in condemning video games or commenting on their role in society, but she knew the controversy and debate that swirled around the issue would make it more interesting.

"You hear so many bad things about them. Whenever somebody goes on a shooting spree, they say he played a lot of video games," she says. "But I know my students play a lot of video games. I know they are here to stay and they are using the technology (you find in video games) in a lot of different ways."

Originally, Frischkorn was going to take pictures of the boys in their own homes but found it was impossible to shoot them the way she wanted because the TVs were usually right up against a wall.

That problem ended up working in her favor. She brought the boys - some from a high school class she was teaching at Penn Manor, others friends of friends or students at Millersville - to her studio. Once there, she began to see the value of taking away all the background and only shooting faces close up.

"I was eliminating context," Frischkorn explains. "It makes the portraits kind of theatrical. Gives them more meaning."

One of her colleagues pointed out what becomes obvious as you look at the portraits: they resemble Renaissance paintings of adoration, of people in rapture.

"I really like the portraits," says Frischkorn. "What I like most about them is their references to historical art paintings."

Originally, she expected the boys to show more expression, to get excited when something happened in their game, but they didn't.

"You can see 15 shots of the same kid and they'd all be the same," she says. "They rarely made facial expressions. I think the reason is they are such intense players. A lot of people says they're zoned out, but they really aren't. They are rapt, Those are really intense concentration faces."

The personality of the 20 boys and young men in the exhibit - all of whom are experienced game players - were, according to Frischkorn, quite different before they sat down to play, but once they started, a concentration took hold.

"The night before we began the shooting, I said to my husband, what have I done? I'm going to be spending the next three weeks with adolescent boys. What have I done! But they were all very nice. They were great. I didn't have any trouble with anyone."

She kept them happy with pizza and soda, and discovered just how big appetites can be when you're an adolescent boy.

"I don't have any kids myself, so I had no idea," she remembers with a laugh. "Four boys drank an entire case of soda the first day of shooting. That's like six cans for each kid!"