ARTWORKS BY JON RAFMAN

JON RAFMAN

Dream Motel

Famously concerned with the ways technology has affected human society, and the way human society has in turn used technology to reflect the ways it has changed, Jon Rafman has also explored the sublime, the uncanny, the ingenuity of human creativity, and the changing role of the artist. Presenting a new body of work generated with AI, here he reflects on building virtual worlds for the viewer to get lost within.

INTERVIEW BY JAK RITGER

JAK RITGER Your process of scraping and categorizing the vast private archives of images in some ways mirrors the same activities of social media and search bar giants. For years, you've collected troves of images from deep online spaces, reconfiguring these aesthetic traces into narratives. Now, as we enter the reality of AI-generated images, you have again mirrored the actions of the tech companies by enriching your data set with machine-learning tools, thus creating unique models for new image production. How has the use of machine learning changed the way you construct or deconstruct your archives and narratives, and how has your use of these tools changed as they've become more widely seen in the mainstream?

JON RAFMAN I see all emerging technologies as potential resources for my practice. AI, in particular, has had a profound impact. Until not long ago, I saw myself as a cyber-flâneur, an explorer, curating an archive from my deep dives into the internet and weaving narratives from it. My past work was rooted in a romantic exploration of preexisting virtual worlds and the internet in general. Rather than continuing my online travels, AI image generation and amateur animation software (which I used to create my latest feature films, *Dream Journal* and Minor Daemon) have allowed me to construct my own virtual worlds from scratch, building universes with my imagination.

I prefer tech that has recently become mainstream. And I like to use the new technology the same way as an average content creator does. The notion of what an artist is has been thrown into crisis by the sheer volume of images we are bombarded with and the democratization of art and its distribution. It raises the question: How does an artist from the rarified world of high art maintain a sense of relevance compared to, for example, a teenager from suburban Ohio crafting extraordinary and vastly more popular TikTok videos that have a tangible effect on culture? However, this doesn't change the fact that, with AI, I'm now capable of creating narratives without needing to hunt for materials online; I can generate them directly with AI, thus facilitating my creative processes. And I'm also currently experimenting with ChatGPT, and making music with AI software. At the end of the day, I strive to reflect our times in my stories, and machine learning is a new, exciting tool that I can employ to achieve this goal. I don't subscribe to the notion that manually created works are somehow more authentic or truthful. One could argue that everything to some degree has become kitsch, and the concept of authenticity seems antiquated. The emergence of AI-generated images can be perceived as the reflection and inevitable outcome of the post-postmodern reality we are living in. There is a parallel between how photography, initially dismissed as commercial rather than artistic, liberated painters from representation and how AI now liberates artists from manual production, from the tedium of producing things by hand and all the time-consuming labor that goes into it. Perhaps the future of art lies in artists becoming prompt engineers or "promptists," evolving with AI The artist will need to get into the mind of the AI, so to speak, and learn to manipulate it or play it as if it were an instrument.

JAR In this thinking about using AI there is the inclination to think that the artist has been replaced by a machine. And, in reality, it's just an artist that's using a different tool. And, at the same time, there's this notion of outsourcing, where the creativity itself is almost outsourced or is augmented by the system itself. And it can reveal something. And this is very similar to the automatic writing, automatic drawing processes of the Surrealists, which is something that you tapped into in *Dream Journal*.

JOR Absolutely.

JAR There's also this sense of outsourcing memory to the cloud and to machines, which is something that your characters are dealing with in *Counterfeit Poast*, as well as *Punctured Sky*. Do you see these experiences as a byproduct of this tendency in contemporary life?

JOR Yes, this is a thesis I've been revisiting in my work since at least *The Nine Eyes of Google Street View*. Technology doesn't just transform the world; it also reveals changes already happening in society and our collective consciousness. My perspectives are largely shaped by the Frankfurt School, particularly Siegfried Kracauer, who was Adorno's teacher. Kracauer argued against the deterministic view that technology acts as an autonomous force changing the world. Technology, and, in this case, the explosion of AI, is simply amplifying and making acutely visible these transformations that have already occurred. One such transformation is the collapse of consensus reality in our post-truth era. It's already practically impossible to discern the truth, leading to stark differences in perceptions of reality between individuals. This phenomenon was starkly evident during the Trump era and the pandemic. There's a poetic quality I find intriguing, particularly in Google Street View. There's tension between the indifferent gaze of the machine, impartially recording what it encounters, and the human gaze, which interprets,

responds to, and makes moral judgments about what it sees. This tension is at the heart of my exploration.

JAR   Your work through Second Life kind of exposes this as well, that there exists a kind of honesty in the artificiality.

> **JOR**   Indeed, I contend that Second Life is more sincere, because it acknowledges its own artificial nature. Conversely, artwork that pretends to represent "reality" tends to be less genuine due to its concealed artifice.
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> Art must also confront the challenge of asserting its significance today more than ever. One wonders what function art serves in a world where everyone can claim to be an artist and the notion of the avant-garde has become obsolete. We live in a time where a once avant-garde abstract painting might merely serve as lobby decoration for a bank, possessing no more or less of a kitschy quality than any postmodern artwork.

JAR   Some of your characters in *Counterfeit Poast* feel as if they were produced by a collective online identity. They're kind of coming out of these message boards. I have been characterizing this movement from online to IRL as "devirtualization"—when digital experience begins to direct reality. Do you believe that digital life has contorted us all into monsters, or are these avatars our chance to transcend the physical into a perfect virtual world?

> **JOR**   Both and neither. As an artist, I'm less interested in predictions. I'm not a trend forecaster. What may seem like the future often reflects the present, with dystopian or utopian visions revealing our current fears and desires. I view utopia and dystopia as two sides of the same coin. The current AI-powered utopia could equally be a dystopia. The artist's role is not to predict the future but rather to critique the present, even if, in dealing with technology, it may seem like dealing with the future. However, there's a common sentiment that the art world has veered off course and typically does not echo the contemporary zeitgeist. Although I still consider the art sphere as the most unrestricted institution for creating experimental pieces that break conventional templates, it has unfortunately alienated itself from the public. My work endeavors to challenge this shift by creating pieces that can be wholly experienced and understood without the need for a press release.

JAR   I think something that really makes your work so potent is the raw guttural reaction it produces in the audience. The profane and the pornographic feature heavily in your work; there's the sense that you are probing the dark corners of the internet and bringing those things into the light, transmuting it into a sublime experience.

There's a dynamic here that I've been looking at for the past couple of years, where aesthetics, structures, and cultures that existed underground and on the periphery of the internet, that are censored from the "clearnet," the publicly searchable internet. They go through this process of recreating themselves to the mainstream as those aesthetics and structures become mainstream, and through this process of recreating, they become cringe. The cringe that we feel is the merging of raw aesthetic experience with the raw commercialism in the mainstream. I'm thinking about the porn industry taking up VHS and then later the shlocky direct-to-video industry developed, now we see the same trajectory with dark web Silk Road Bitcoin drug markets transforming into NFT marketplaces.

So along this aesthetic terrain here, where would you place your work on this kind of continuum, from illegalism, illicit images to the kind of normie, cringe, prosumer aesthetic? Or do you think that that's a useful dichotomy at all?

> **JOR**   There are two perspectives to consider here: first, I think we're living in a post-cringe era, where, as I mentioned earlier, everything is kitsch on one level. Cringe "art" like Bored Apes and most NFTs also reflects a reality where art is a commodity or currency. They express the vulgar logical extreme of a transformation already occurring in the art market, where paintings have become a trading asset for collectors to speculate on. Artists are urged to churn out similar works to facilitate trading.
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> Where does my work fit in this context? Like many artists, filmmakers and writers, I aim to create narratives that resonate with people for years to come. Ideally, I aim for my work to live on with the viewer well beyond their initial encounter with it. I wish to rise above the transient, instantaneous pleasure that tends to define our interaction with media online—for instance, while swiftly browsing through Instagram or other social media feeds, where the engagement with images often leans towards sheer consumption. My aspiration is to foster a more con-

"AI is the ultimate representation of this kitsch, hyper-pastiche postmodern context that we are trapped in."

templative aesthetic experience. Whether I accomplish this is another question.

JAR   Using these new tools, there's this feeling of reconstituting that wonder of early experimental work and experimentation and learning these tools for the first time.

JOR   Like in earlier work, I like to weave in elements of nostalgia into the narrative, although nostalgia must be handled with care, as it can be easily reduced to a tool of manipulation if not employed properly.

JAR   And nostalgia itself is the main way that these AI images are being produced, because there's such a vast index of nostalgic images; it's so rich. But then, at the same time, when it comes back, it feels incredibly new and it feels like it's delivering on these emotional experiences that we never have or we're nostalgic for rooms that we've never been in. So in closing, do you think that nostalgia itself is a form of AI?

JOR   Now, we have reached a point where we can experience nostalgia for memories that no one has actually lived through. For instance, when an AI generates a Polaroid depicting a joyous family moment from the 80s. Perhaps AI-created images of fabricated memories illuminate the artificial nature of memory, highlighting that we never recall the past as it truly was but, rather, we remember it through the ever-shifting lens of the present.

One of the main themes in my work is memory and the past and how they are fundamental in the construction of personal identity and our personal narratives, as well as a nation's or humanity's identity and place in history. Never before have we had such extensive access to information spanning the entirety of human history. Yet, our understanding of our historical context is diminishing, leading to a sense that humanity is doomed to repeat itself over and over.

My use of nostalgia is also closely linked to my exploration of how media reflects and influences our perception of the past. A significant memory from our past, especially if it's traumatic, can profoundly impact our identity and worldview. When such a memory is challenged, like in my film *Punctured Sky*, it can trigger a personal crisis. In this context, technology and media play a significant role.

When our ability to determine the truth of a past image or memory falters, it changes our understanding of history, prompting us to question every aspect of reality. And today, everything is so fragmented, the individual is so atomized, and everyone already exists in their own algorithmically curated reality. AI is simply serving as a catalyst to this process, rendering it increasingly visible and transparent.

During the Pop era, when a genuine mainstream monoculture existed, Andy Warhol used Marilyn Monroe as an artistic symbol. We no longer have a shared cultural icon like this. As an artist, I'm always searching for new artistic languages. Currently, niche internet subcultures and internet-specific languages are the closest things to universal narratives like the ones found in Greco-Roman mythology and religious texts.

In an era where everything is recorded and simultaneously instantly forgotten due to hyper-accelerated life pace, what implications does this have on personal and societal identity? Moreover, what happens when our entire social life exists in the virtual space, a much more fragile and transient environment than the physical world? Imagine, for instance, if a substantial part of your social and emotional life resides solely within an online universe, like a World of Warcraft-style MMORPG, and suddenly the game gets discontinued. Your social realm could evaporate instantaneously, leaving no trace behind. Unlike the physical remnants of Roman ruins, a deleted digital world completely vanishes, leaving no evidence of its existence. This profound, apocalyptic imagery is a compelling representation of our current societal condition, where vast social cosmoses can dissipate in just a split second. ⋈

Jon Rafman (Montreal, b. 1981) is a Canadian artist expressing a complex take on internet technologies through video, installation, animation, photography, and sculpture. Rafman's latest video work *Counterfeit Poast* will be shown in Paris in June on the occasion of the festival KALEIDOSCOPE Manifesto.

Jak Ritger is an artist and theorist based primarily on the internet, in the NEW MODELS and Do Not Research discords. He writes about how digital existence is impacting daily life, politics, and the built environment on his blog, *Punctr.Art*.