

art

american artist jon rafman is a pioneer of post-internet art. from video games to the darknet and virtual reality, he reveals the horrifying side of visual pollution and the social mindfuck of the digital age.

like a modern-day hieronymus bosch, he depicts hell on earth populated with weird creatures, freaky avatars, and fractured identities. a contaminated but fun world.

WON by **ALEPH MOLINARI** and **OLIVIER ZAHM** **RAFMAN**

PORTRAITS BY MONI HAWORTH



JON RAFMAN, STILL FROM *DREAM JOURNAL* 2016-2019, 2019



OLIVIER ZAHM — Let's start with a basic question. Do you like or dislike being seen as a digital artist?
 JON RAFMAN — I don't like to get hung up on that question. Some colleagues of mine hate being pigeonholed into specific categories, but I don't see any point in wasting my energy fighting labels. They simply make it easier for critics and journalists to write about your work. But "digital artist" definitely doesn't capture what I'm trying to do in my work because I don't actually care about technology in itself. Digital tech is not inherently interesting to me. I don't fetishize it. I'm not a hacker. I don't even really know how to code. I try to use technology the same way a teenager in Idaho might. And I care about it only insofar as it tells me about the present. I'm most concerned with the present moment, with contemporary society, so I choose to use the technologies that simultaneously bring us closer and push us further apart as the fundamental material for my artistic explorations.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You'll recall that punks declared that the future is dead. They didn't believe in the future; they were pushing the moment, killing any idealism or hope in the future. Looking at your work, can we say that the punk mentality or the punk movement has moved into the cyber world?
 JON RAFMAN — Yes. I don't think this notion is new, and cyberpunk came right after. The idea of being trapped in a permanent present is still accurate. What's more, we've lost any sense of our place in history. Imagining a better future — or at least having a plan for a utopian, emancipatory future — is long gone. Now we debate which dystopian hell awaits us. Our understanding of where we are in human history is also gone. At the same time, it feels like we're living in the future more and more; at least, that's how things are framed to us. In actuality, even though things are transforming so quickly, on a deeper level nothing changes. We have collective amnesia. We're trapped in a vicious cycle, history repeating itself as farce over and over.

ALEPH MOLINARI — Were you influenced by any cyberpunk or sci-fi authors? The big writers, like William Gibson or Philip K. Dick?
 JON RAFMAN — There's nothing more depressing than looking at William Gibson's Twitter these days. He is what you'd call "blue-pilled." He's certainly not very punk anymore. Nonetheless, I still love his writing and am deeply influenced by it. However hard it is, you have to divorce the writer from their politics. Sci-fi, in general, is one of my favorite genres. But if I were to name some of my favorite writers, I would include Cormac McCarthy and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Most of my favorite writers are not sci-fi, with the exception of Philip K. Dick. I'm also heavily influenced by role-playing video games and books like *Dungeons & Dragons*. And I have incredible scans of old *Cyberpunk* sourcebooks. And the cover art is gorgeous.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Looking at your work, we couldn't help thinking about *Beavis and Butt-Head*. Were you a fan of these two guys?
 JON RAFMAN — Of course. Mike Judge is a genius — at least his early work was.

OLIVIER ZAHM — They seem to have disappeared from pop culture today, no?
 JON RAFMAN — They have, and they haven't. The '90s and part of the early 2000s were the last eras of monolithic pop culture. Now everything's been fragmented. You can find an online community for every marginal fetish, for every single hobby imaginable. No longer do you define yourself by what music you listen to. Now it's often what video games you play or what influencer you follow. We've had a Cambrian explosion of micro-celebrities. Some meme-makers and shitposters create sophisticated, edgy content and purposefully unsophisticated content. These Based and Cringe content creators might be considered the contemporary Mike Judges. In the recent past, artists who made groundbreaking work critical of the establishment had a space in mainstream media. Now that space no longer exists, except on the fringe parts of the

Internet, which is increasingly the media that young people consume.

ALEPH MOLINARI — Yes, and Mike Judge created in *Beavis and Butt-Head* prototypes that represent the losers who have been destroyed by pop culture.
 JON RAFMAN — Yeah, but we had a shared sense of culture not so long ago. For pretty much all of history, most people had a sense of shared culture and identity within their community, a shared symbolic language, be it religion, Greek myths, the canon, or regional folk cultures. You could communicate with other people because you shared a sense of history. Now there's often no shared point of reference. There aren't even any truly iconic A-list celebrities being minted anymore. Simultaneously, consensus reality has collapsed. You realize that we're all existing with different planes of reference. We all live in different virtual realities, our own little echo chambers. And the algorithms that Facebook and Google create are just enforcing this post-truth world on all of us. All of us exist each in our little bubble. And we stop being able actually to relate to each other.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How would you define this new culture, the meme culture? Is it really something entirely new?
 JON RAFMAN — Yeah. That's the closest thing we have now to some sort of universal language and discourse — it's like writing on bathroom walls took over the world. But memes have become so sophisticated and self-conscious. They have transcended being just jokes.

ALEPH MOLINARI — It's the new cartoon.
 JON RAFMAN — Yeah. It's related to the satirical cartoons of caricaturists like Honoré Daumier but can't be reduced to their contemporary version. Memes have been evolving for over a decade now. And it's not only memes but all these different Internet languages that attracted me to Net art in the first place. In the mid-2000s, after the emergence of the Web 2.0, all these new languages were forming,



JON RAFMAN, STILL FROM *DREAM JOURNAL* 2016-2019, 2019





and new languages are what artists look for to feed their work. They are a rich mine of material for artists to pull from. Honestly, I'm way more excited by a meme on a shitpost Instagram account than most things I see in museums these days.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And why is art still so serious and taken so seriously? It seems like art has become very academic.

JON RAFMAN — We've seen this happen many times throughout history. The punks were one reaction; the Impressionists, the degenerate artists, another... There are great artists today, but they are often outsiders or not on the path to art historical canonization. The art world feels less relevant these days for a variety of reasons. For one, I find it pandering too often to the official ideologies and the market. And it is also alienating itself from the rest of culture through the academicism you mention. It's been moving in that direction for a while, but it's reaching a new extreme. Art has become a way to store assets and a tool of moralizing propagandists. It's become financialized and turned into an ideological tool. Great art shouldn't try to sell you something. The best art contains ambiguity and paradoxes. But now, more and more often, art is trying to sell you something.

ALEPH MOLINARI — You've been working with digital

art for a long time. Do you find that there is a future for NFTs [non-fungible tokens] and the transfer of artworks into the digital space?

JON RAFMAN — Well, I'm happy for many friends and colleagues who weren't making any money in the gallery art world and are now richer than most artists I know. [Laughs] I see it more as a way of patronage, rather than these works being great works of art. It's similar to the Zombie Formalist era, when artists would produce hundreds of variations of the same artwork. This is what succeeds in the NFT market right now. You create a series of works that look very similar; it's like trading cards. You can create a market through that and then have a few whales pump up the price. But now it has this new technology, which is very exciting, and not just for art — for everything. And it's just the beginning

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, for you, NFTs are not just a trend or a way for cryptocurrency to find legitimacy?

JON RAFMAN — It's not going away. There are obviously going to be bubbles and crashes. I think the smart contract is a legit good development, and it can be used for numerous purposes. They're here to stay. It's the total financialization of reality. You once had all these anonymous people creating work for no higher purpose than contributing



to the zeitgeist. Before, creators made art in obscurity, and now they can profit from it. Although I wouldn't consider most NFTs art — they're more like trading cards. It's decentralized free-market capitalism at its most intense. At the same time, we live in an era where power has been centralized more than ever before in history. The tech monopolies control the algorithms that dominate our lives, the very way we perceive reality.

ALEPH MOLINARI — In the beginning, they thought that the Internet and virtual space would do the opposite by decentralizing power, providing anonymity and freedom of expression... JON RAFMAN — Exactly, that was the big thing when I was coming up.

ALEPH MOLINARI — Do you think the darknet is a solution to regaining that anonymity and freedom?

JON RAFMAN — I honestly think it's an illusion because five companies control everything — the servers, the infrastructure of the Internet itself — and could technically shut anything down. There is a sense that these forces of decentralization can resist it, but we don't control the ethernet cables. But, yes, there are forces of decentralization that are gaining power, like crypto. There are more opportunities for anonymity and escaping surveillance than before. New tools to hide from the all-seeing eyes of these tech companies that can observe everything we do and then profit off that information... The Internet started with all these big hopes and dreams. It was a space where everyone had a voice. It was a democratic revolution in media and communication. Then over the years, things got dark. It's a classic story, from the French Revolution and romanticism to hippie culture to rave culture, on and on. It starts out idealistic and over time becomes darker, often for a wide variety of reasons, but that's too big a subject to get into right now. In general, there is no longer a sense of a project. There's no longer an emancipatory imagination. The left has collapsed

after failure upon failure over the course of the 20th century. They have no actual power, and their progressive ideals just get consumed by neoliberalism. There is no longer any revolutionary imagination, and we can't even imagine anything other than our current state.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I realize that you are very informed by philosophy. Do you have a favorite philosopher on this issue?

JON RAFMAN — Yes, I studied philosophy. My interest in college was German idealism, and I believe in Reason, the Enlightenment, and dialectics. I got into the Frankfurt School in my graduate studies, which has fewer philosophers and more cultural theorists with a Hegelian Marxist background. But discourse doesn't make art. I find that is a problem, especially in the art world, where discourse is more important than physical artwork, and you need a press release to understand anything. This creates dry work that is not relevant to the general public.

OLIVIER ZAHM — No, I totally understand. But philosophy is a very creative place, too. If we're talking about the present, we're talking about time. And talking about time is scientific, but it's also philosophical. The two are connected. And when we are confronted with a global machine, the digital world, we're confronted with a time machine because every microsecond is recorded. You see what I mean? We are in a time machine now.

JON RAFMAN — Yes, I do. Additionally, each of our worldviews has become narrower, and society is polarized. We have more and more information and less and less meaning. And no great philosophers to analyze our current predicament. There are good social critics, but I am aware of no great philosophers who have emerged in our time. The most fascinating and intelligent Zoomers I know have grown up entirely on the Internet and are autodidacts. Their education is so fragmented; their sources of knowledge come from the far margins of the Internet. I know



some super-smart kids whose minds are shooting ideas so fast, making connections with no foundation, no philosophical ground that allows them to connect these disparate things into a coherent whole. But in a way, this is a more truthful conception of reality than some academic trying to impose a 19th-century philosophy on the present.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you see technology, video games, social media, and the whole digital world as a new legal drug for kids and for us?

JON RAFMAN — I definitely see it as a way to channel libidinal energy. So, if you mean it in the Marxist sense of the "opiate of the masses"... We, humans, construct technology, then technology comes to dominate us. An algorithm could transform your identity. There's complete chaos because there's no sense of where we are in history. You have these young kids filled with libidinal energy, and there is no place for them in society, and they don't have the same opportunities that their Boomer parents had in postwar America. It's not like you can graduate from high school, get a good job at a company, get a mortgage easily, have a home, and save enough money for retirement. Now a university education gives you zero guarantee of employment. There is a massive number of alienated youth who have no opportunities. And video games and media now fill that void through the little instant dopamine rushes they give because all of society has become a video game. Reality has been gamified. Crypto is one big example of this gamification. It's so addictive! We've even started to find ways to monetize playing video games. Many video-game Twitch streamers are bigger than rock stars nowadays. When I was growing up, video games

were seen as a pure waste of time. But now these game economies are starting to have a lot more relevance. The video-game industry is way bigger than Hollywood. If there are no opportunities in the real world for you, now there are real opportunities in the virtual world. You get addicted to games because of that little dopamine rush you get for making it to the next level. Facebook — now Meta — controls the dopamine receptors in our brain. Once you control the dopamine, you control reality.

OLIVIER ZAHM — That's really scary.

JON RAFMAN — It's happened. We're in it.

ALEPH MOLINARI — In your film *Punctured Sky*, the storyline of the film is about a character who wants to find an obscure video game that he had played, but he ends up just looking at a blank screen. Are these screens that we look at so many times a day just a black hole creating fake memories or erasing the past? Or is there a deeper reflection in those blank screens of technology?

JON RAFMAN — Spoiler alert. [Laughs] That is the question. That, for me, is what the film is about on one level, asking yourself: all those hours you spent online in front of the screens, playing video games, what was it all for? Especially if these experiences just disappeared into the digital ether... These days, it's possible that all your best memories are in virtual worlds, be it playing games with your friends or falling in love with a girl online. And these are your formative experiences, especially right now with the pandemic. There are so many people whose entire experience of university is not physical. What does that do to somebody over time? How do you place all those memories within the construction of your identity? Many people put all their energy and emotional life and desires and imagination into a screen reality that's become more real than the actual world.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Or where the actual relationship would disintegrate immediately.

JON RAFMAN — Yes, exactly. We're constantly projecting onto the screen. It's extremely narcissistic. Something is changing, though. Instagram, for example, for many millennials, was centered around influencer culture. Often, millennials were focused on creating brands for themselves, everyone presenting themselves as their ideal self on social media. But I've noticed that the new generation of Zoomers are more interested in maintaining anonymity. It's not as much about building personal brands as it was in the 2010s. Now we're entering what's known as Web 3.0, and as I said, it's a return to anonymity. These Zoomer kids have multiple secret anonymous accounts. It's a reaction against the blue-check-mark establishment. The goal is no longer to have a million followers but just quality ones. It's also a result of cancel culture and the world becoming more totalitarian, where everybody is constantly policing each other. I have Zoomer friends who have seen half a dozen of their friends canceled before graduating college. If you want to be freer to express what you want, you can't be a celebrity influencer. If you are anonymous online, you won't be subject to attacks if you don't abide by the official views of society.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What you were saying about anonymity — and people developing different accounts, having different communities, and not trying to be an influencer anymore — opens the door to new forms of identity. Will we all, or at least the new generation, develop this avatar culture? JON RAFMAN — That's a very true observation. There's been an explosion of identities. Some describe our era as neo-feudal. It's wild. I know Zoomers who are monarchists, Catholics, Russian Orthodox, all these identities. Many of my friends in their early 20s developed niche identities and are members of hyper-specific niche communities. For example, I'm friends with the incredible young writer Honor Levy, deeply connected to the zeitgeist, and she and her friends are "TradCath." Not like an



BOTH PAINTINGS BY
JON RAFMAN, 2017, COURTESY
OF THE ARTIST AND SPRÜTH
MAGERS

Italian grandmother-style traditional Catholic. She was born Jewish and is now a downtown New York-lite-rati-Zoomer-visionary-artist Catholic. She and her friends are regularly accused of being ironic or post-ironic, or of role-playing the TradCath identity, but they aren't. They're sincere about their faith. There are many reasons for this rise of faith. In one sense, it's the culmination of an increasingly nihilistic and moralizing culture. Perhaps it's a response to nihilism, totalitarian secular liberalism, and all these contradictions in our society. We live in a culture that prides itself on being progressive, promotes social justice, yet is extraordinarily authoritarian and shames everyone who does not abide by the official ideology.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's burgeoning from different directions, from every kind of cycle. And the new forms are not the old forms.
JON RAFMAN — On one level, we return to the past, yet in truth, you can never really return to the older version of things when the context has completely transformed. We are all role-playing, but we have been role-playing so long that we have absorbed our masks. With anonymous Internet identities, there's freedom to choose whatever avatar you want to inhabit and play whatever role you want. As I said, power is more centralized than ever at another level. So, these two extremes exist simultaneously.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, a syndrome of multiple identities.
JON RAFMAN — Yeah, it's "schizzed," like schizophrenic. That's the experience that I tried to capture in *Dream Journal*, my first feature film. I tried to capture this schizzed-out feeling of living today, of surfing the Internet, which is analogous to the experience of dreaming for me. We are bombarded with more data than ever before in history, and we cannot process it all. In our timelines on social media, there is a stream of information, one post after another, completely disconnected

from each other, like events when you try to retell a dream.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Speaking about your films, I wanted to ask you about the washing machine that gets destroyed in *Mainsqueeze*. I think it's an incredible symbol — a machine destroying itself. What exactly does it mean for you?
JON RAFMAN — In that series, known as the *Betamale Trilogy*, I was trying to create a poetic montage style using found Internet imagery. My goal was to create 21st-century symbolist poetry or Decadent poetry like that of Baudelaire. I feel connected to a lyrical, narrative tradition. I search for images that capture our moment yet are open to interpretation. In this series, I also set out to marry opposites, like beauty and the grotesque, the romantic and ironic, the sublime and the banal, and the sacred and the profane. You can find beauty in the parking lot of a shopping mall or a self-destructing washing machine. Yet I don't want to define these images because art should not be reducible to a didactic explanation. At the same time, you want to find intent; you don't want it just to be complete Dadaist nonsense anymore, even though there's an element of the Dadaist impulse that's powerful and still relevant. After all, the Internet is kind of a giant Dadaist space.

ALEPH MOLINARI — I see another aspect in your approach to the machine that's very present in your found images from Google Earth, where the technology captures everything in a global, standardized way. Do you see beauty in the accident of the machine? Is this where you find beauty in the digital world?
JON RAFMAN — This "accident of the machine" is what gives the Street View photos part of their power and freshness. The fact that the pictures were captured randomly by an indifferent camera without the manipulations of a human photographer imbues the photos with a certain spontaneous documentary weight. But at the end of the day, the residual traces of the machine, of digital processes

in my work, always remain subservient to the poetic narrative.

OLIVIER ZAHM — As you said, everything is decentralized now. You are living in California. Do you still feel that you are in the place to be for the future?
JON RAFMAN — California is very much a virtual world. At the same time, though, it has a natural beauty. I'm more interested in the present than the future. The present contains the seeds of the future.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And do you see the future getting even darker?
JON RAFMAN — I've said this before, and I'll repeat it. The artist's role is not to predict the future but to reflect on the present. In the late aughts and the early '10s, I discovered a community of artists interested in exploring the emerging Internet culture. We all felt part of a community and followed what each other was doing. We were not part of the art world's mainstream at the time, yet there was a fast-paced, productive artistic conversation going on. I felt tied to a movement without a manifesto, but it still felt like a vital movement. There was a sense of excitement about the Internet. And then the community fell apart. Some became quote-unquote professional artists; others became cynical and dropped out. In the past year or so, there has been a vibe shift. A new cycle has begun, tied to Web 3.0, with discord communities and crypto communities forming and Zoomers gaining more cultural power. I'm seeing a new sense of community emerging again, like in the aughts. It's exciting to feel a part of a community again. Nonetheless, we still live in a dystopian reality controlled by algorithms.

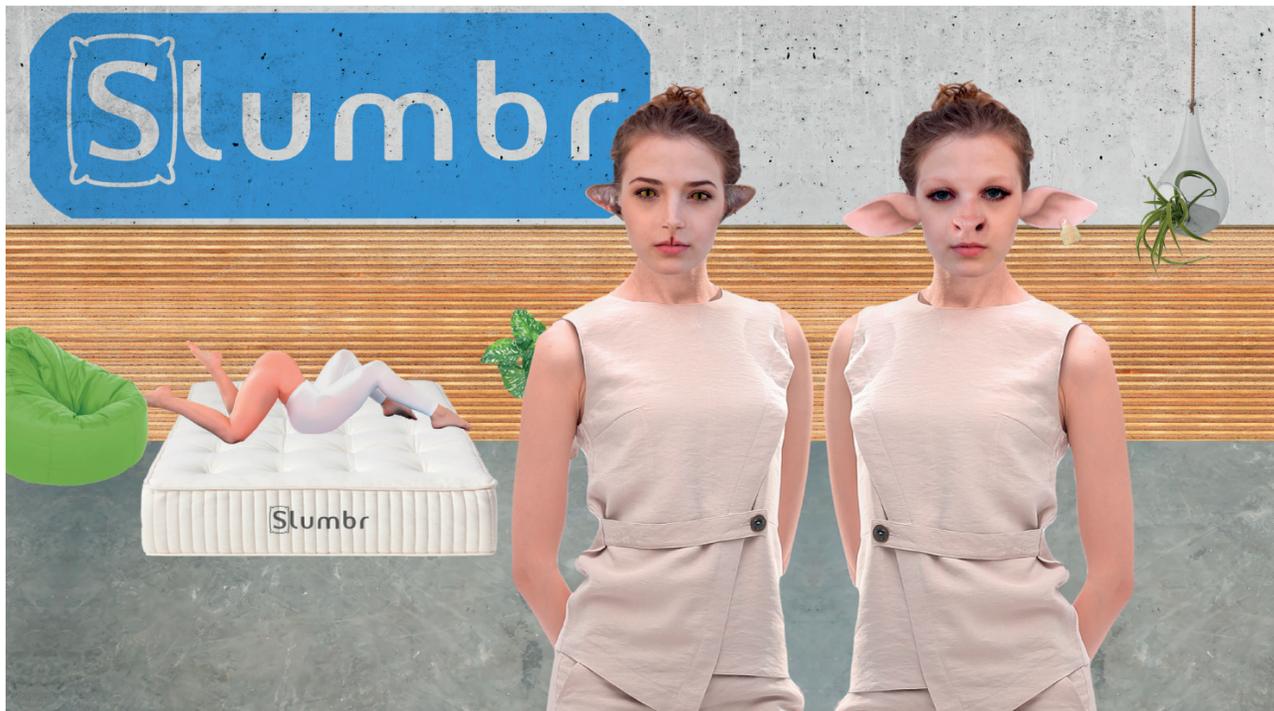
END



visual essay **PUNCTURED SKY**
by JON RAFMAN



In Jon Rafman's film *Punctured Sky*, an unseen narrator reunites with his old friend Joey Bernstein in the dingy backroom of a comics and games store located in a dead mall. Bernstein asks if the narrator remembers their favorite childhood computer game, called *Punctured Sky*, and informs him that all trace of the game has vanished from history. The narrator embarks on a quest through a parallel universe full of animal-human hybrids to uncover the truth behind the mysterious disappearance of the game. Along the way, he must contend with a series of strange encounters online and offline and confront the precariousness of memory in the digital age.





JON RAFMAN, STILLS FROM *PUNCTURED SKY*, 2021

