

ART REVIEW

Off the Board Game, Onto the Digital Canvas

Are role-playing games enriching culture, or destroying it? In two shows, the artist Simon Denny spoofs the grandiose fantasy worlds of tech entrepreneurs designing virtual reality.

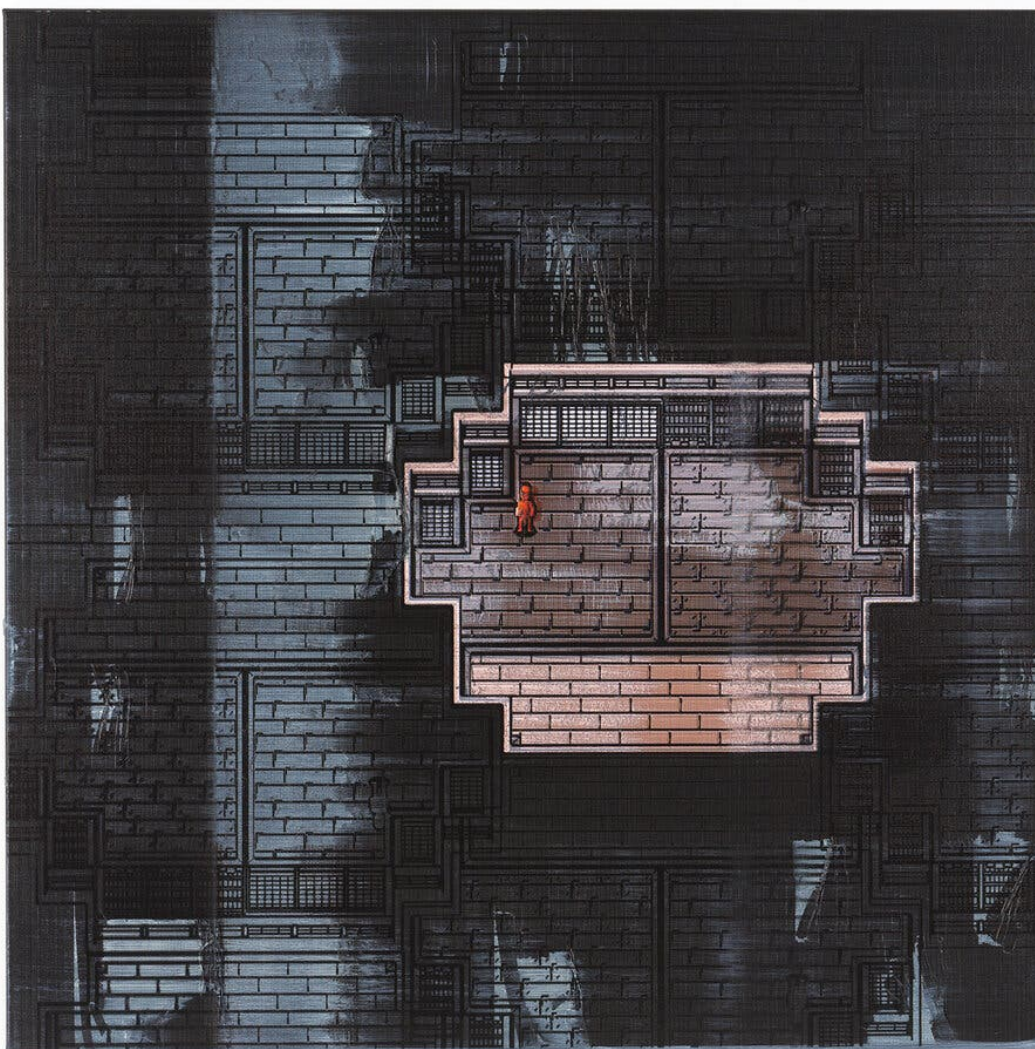
By Travis Diehl

March 6, 2024

The capricious churn of internet-charged culture is producing more main characters, apocrypha and relics than we can handle. Remember when the Canadian musician known as Grimes — former partner of one of the world’s most powerful men, the tech entrepreneur Elon Musk — brought a sword to the 2021 Met Gala? The image of a futurist pop star lugging a medieval blade (made from a smelted AR-15, no less) down the red carpet summed up the mystifying way contemporary culture seems to run in all directions, chasing myths both new and old.

Simon Denny, an artist working in Berlin, creates sculptures, installations, videos and prints inspired by the aesthetics of tech companies. In two concurrent shows in Manhattan he has seized on omens like the blade to explore the sociopolitical fallout of the technology industry’s taste for medieval lore. In Denny’s telling, dreams of wizards and blacksmiths, dark forests and dank castles shape the newest digital realms.

“Dungeon,” Denny’s fifth show with Petzel Gallery in New York, features a kind of heaving shrine to Grimes: Puffs from an automatic steamer inflate a black “Game of Thrones” T-shirt once owned by the star, installed in a Plexiglas case like a suit of armor. The sculpture is plugged into a power strip that Denny sourced from a liquidation sale at Twitter during its Musk-mandated transition to X.

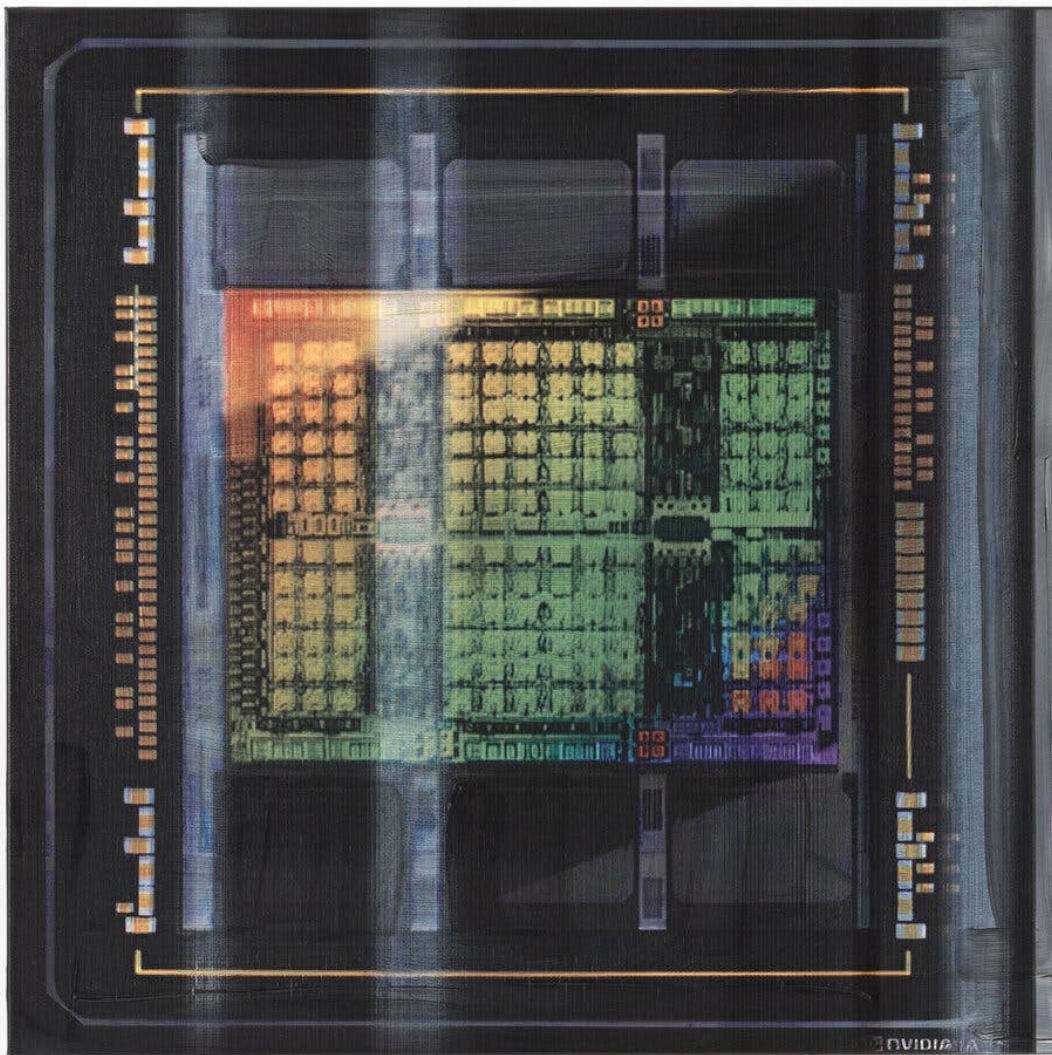


“Dungeon map 5: Worldwide Webb small apartment,” from 2024. Denny’s UV print, a top-down view of a dungeonlike video game map, shows how virtual life is bound by medieval aesthetics. Simon Denny, via Petzel, New York; Photo by Nick Ash

Downtown, “Read Write Own,” Denny’s first show with Dunkunsthalle, an artist-run space in the financial district, offers recent paintings from his “Metaverse Landscape” series alongside sculptures made using whiteboards auctioned off by Twitter after Musk took the reins. The work suggests that internet culture, and by extension our heavily networked society, resembles the fantasy landscapes evoked by Dungeons & Dragons, or “The Lord of the Rings.” Tech-augmented life, in other words, can be understood as a massive role-playing game, in which physical and virtual realms merge, and Musk et al. make the rules. (Denny also curated a current group show at Petzel featuring like-minded artists exploring fantasy genres with new media such as 3-D printing.)

“Dungeon” features a new series of paintings of top-down views of various role-playing

game maps — really digital prints on canvas, smeared with oil pigment, for a photorealistic yet decaying effect. In a rendering of a HeroQuest board, gray, blue and green bricks simmer in the blocky darkness like a geometric abstraction. Other paintings deepen the idea of “dungeon”: One smeary figure eight is the board for a Hannah Montana-branded version of the tabletop game Mall Madness. A beguiling iridescent pattern on another painting could be ranks of columns or shelves, but the company name Nvidia in the corner tells you it’s actually a graphics card of the sort often adapted for handling cryptocurrency transactions.



“Dungeon map 4: Nvidia H100 chip,” from 2024. A UV print on canvas, smeared with oil, resembles a dungeon map or game board but depicts a graphics card by Nvidia that had the unintended consequence of powering the cryptocurrency boom. Simon Denny, via Petzel, New York; Photo by Nick Ash

Denny’s skeptical view of the tech industry in “Dungeon” is a little obvious; it deepens

upon viewing the show at Dunkunsthalle, where the “Metaverse Landscapes” depict virtual real estate. One smooth earth tone map highlights a “waterfront” lot. Others resemble pixelated blueprints of streets and storefronts.

The idea of metaverse “landscapes” plays on the history of landscape paintings, which in Europe historically served as boasts about royal possessions, and in the United States as advertisements for westward expansion, offering (false, romantic) pictures of virgin wilderness for the taking. By including the metaverse in this lineage, Denny underlines the bleak fact that today’s land grabs often don’t involve actual land. So many people are unable to afford an actual house that the idea of investing in a digital plot is a bitter mockery. QR codes on the works’ sides link to blockchain entries that track these weightless parcels’ current owners. The visual charm of the paintings is second to the heady appeal of owning a painting of someone else’s virtual property, and that, as Denny seems to point out, this canvas image is, fundamentally, the more real of the two.



“Metaverse Landscape 20: Somnium Space Extra Large #3233 (XL),” from 2023. An oil on canvas UV print shows a virtual lot that has been purchased on the Somnium platform. Simon Denny, via Dunkunsthalle; Photo by Adam Reich

Denny doesn't push artistic style in new directions so much as study the aesthetics of the tech industry. Part of his tradeshow-like 2015 exhibition at MoMA PS1 in Queens showcased replicas of objects seized in the spectacular downfall of Kim Dotcom, also known as Kim Schmitz, a German Finnish internet entrepreneur. Included was a huge statue of a Predator from the sci-fi action movies. Denny's previous show at Petzel, in 2021, dealt with an Amazon patent for a comically bulbous delivery drone.

Viewing these objects in the full light of reality, tech's aesthetics look a little crummy. But the toylike silliness of the future shouldn't make us laugh, Denny suggests — it should unnerve us.

There's a sword at Petzel, too: Across the room from the T-shirt shrine hangs a replica of Anduril, an Elven blade from "The Lord of the Rings," which Denny fashioned from resin tinted with coffee. It's based on the sword owned by Palmer Luckey, the defense contractor and inventor of the Oculus Rift virtual reality headset (he sold the company he founded to Facebook for \$2 billion). Luckey once modified a headset — as a joke — with explosives so that if your avatar dies in a game, you die in real life. He also founded a defense technology company, Anduril Industries. (Several of his partners in that venture came from the big-data company Palantir, also named for a "Lord of the Rings" treasure.)

That a V.R. guru would make very real military drones and robotic sentries, under the brand of an imaginary weapon, doesn't inspire confidence. Neither does the slogan, emblazoned at Petzel on a shadowy UV print depicting one of Anduril's autonomous fighter jets: "Fight Unfair."

Is it all a game to these digital pioneers? Do they know where virtual reality ends and "meatspace" begins? Denny reminds us that the more networked our lives become, the more tech's rules bind our fantasies.

Dungeon

Through March 30, Petzel Gallery, 35 East 67th Street, Manhattan; 212-680-9467, petzel.com.

Read Write Own

Through March 31, Dunkunsthalle, 64 Fulton Street, Lower Manhattan; 917-382-4744, dunkunsthalle.com.