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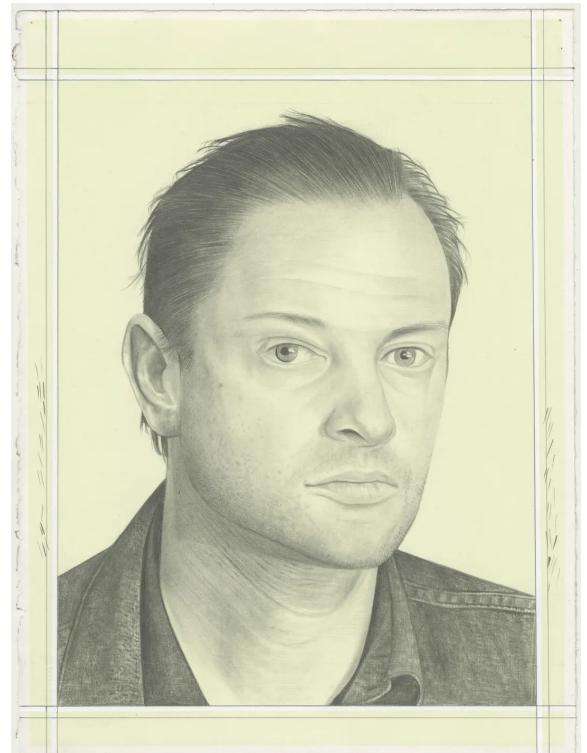
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Simon Denny with Toby Kamps



Portrait of Simon Denny, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Berlin-based, New Zealand-born artist Simon Denny makes sculptures, paintings, and installations exploring the forces influencing technology companies and their decision-makers. In a solo exhibition at MoMA PS1 in 2015, he investigated the life of Kim Dotcom, renegade hacker and online entrepreneur, and at the Venice Biennale that same year, he considered the wizard and magic clip-art imagery littering the intelligence-agency slide decks leaked by Edward Snowden. Other projects translated the strategies of early cryptocurrency companies and the philosophy of billionaire PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel into board games. Of course, since, as Denny observes, “we live and breathe” in online, commercial realms, his work is also about the contemporary human condition. *Dungeon*, his current

ON VIEW

Petzel Gallery

Dungeon

February 21–

March 30, 2024

New York

exhibition at Petzel, considers how the idea and design of the eponymous space—underground, labyrinthine, and always at least a bit creepy—has infiltrated all manner of virtual environments. Toggling between works in two and three dimensions that depict popular-culture and computer gaming and chip imagery, the exhibition considers how fantasy games like Dungeons & Dragons became primary reference points for the code writers and defense-tech engineers shaping our world, in which the borders between hardware and vaporware have become increasingly hazy.



Simon Denny, *Dungeon map 1: Dungeons & Dragons Computer Labyrinth board / Dark Forest Valhalla prize planet (Defiant Conspire)*, 2024. Oil and UV print on canvas, 20 5/8 x 20 5/8 x 7 3/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Nick Ash.

Toby Kamps (Rail): What's the name of your show opening at Petzel Gallery in New York this month?

Simon Denny: *Dungeon*.

Rail: And it's about dungeon design as it appears in online spaces, right?

Denny: Yes, this is a form that has been very influential in virtual space design. I'm really interested in how the dungeon idiom has gone from science-fiction fantasy games, such as in the original Dungeons & Dragons, to the beginnings of computer gaming, to becoming one of the key metaphors undergirding online experiences today. It doesn't necessarily mean a place where you put prisoners and torture them. It can also refer to the labyrinthine ways we move through online worlds and metaverses. Gaming and system design often get merged because the people dreaming up and executing computer interfaces often have gaming environments as primary reference points. The dungeon space, which is also probably still part of warfare and oppressive practices, is also a metaphorical space that has become hardwired into how we think about virtual space.

Rail: You've also looked at how this kind of subterranean thinking is reflected in defense technology.

Denny: Yes, I'm interested in how weapons design comes across and overlaps with the activities of tech companies and how both fields share concepts that might relate to dungeon space. I'm thinking of "defense tech," this new buzzword and investing frame, that describes companies that make the things used by clients like the US Department of Defense. The imaginary space of the dungeon has seeped into all corners of experience. I think it's a very important cultural form that is very much under-examined. The dungeon idiom is a part of the virtual spaces that we encounter every day, and it seems key to our cultural moment.

Rail: Also, on a more psychological level, some of the algorithms used by social media platforms put you into kinds of dungeons, inescapable, addictive, and oftentimes negative feedback loops.

Denny: Right. When, over time, I realized how important game design is for virtual business design, and then how important social media is in terms of how we all think and behave, I became interested in the people who designed them: what do they think are the most important things in the world? Really important figures like Elon Musk are gamers. He plays games every day, and he's described how playing *Diablo*, which is partially set in the nether regions of Hell, helps him relax. He mentioned in an interview recently that "defeating hatred in the Eternal Realm" of *Diablo IV* was a highlight—which I found evocative. My work is focused on technologies, their decision makers, and the forces influencing them. The

people that build technological products have been an important cultural force for some time now, and it's fascinating to look at how they move in and out of spaces of power. The virtual formats that they have imagined impact how things become real and important.

Rail: Let's talk about some of the work.



Simon Denny, *Dungeon artifact 5: Grimes 'War is Coming' ex-Twitter Belkin power strip*, 2024. Plexiglasbox, Game of Thrones T- Shirt formerly owned by Grimes, Cleanmaxxx shirt ironing machine, Belkin power strip sourced from Twitter office liquidation auction, remote controller, 55 7/8 x 34 1/4 x 16 7/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Nick Ash.

Denny: I'll show you one that's kind of directly related to what we just discussed: *Dungeon artifact 5: Grimes 'War is Coming' ex-Twitter Belkin power strip* (2024). I like to collect significant objects. The *Game of Thrones* T-shirt in this work came from an auction of things belonging to the musician and technologist Grimes.

Rail: Who was with Elon Musk, right?

Denny: They have several children together. This was from a charity auction she organized. Beneath it is a multi-plug, or outlet multiplier, that was sold as surplus when Musk took Twitter and turned it into X. I like these pop-cultural and technological associations and their connections to Grimes and Musk. And I've mounted Grimes's t-shirt on an inflatable, torso-shaped machine for ironing shirts, but I've hacked it so that it just kind of breathes. The *Game of Thrones* T-shirt with its "war is coming" slogan inflates and deflates because it's plugged into a power source that came from Twitter. I find the way that this thing becomes a physique that hangs on the wall and breathes with you very haunting. The way the work comes together also says something about the online spaces that put us into boxes where we can huff and puff.

Rail: Are you a gamer?

Denny: I have gamed in various different ways since I was a kid, but I feel like I'm more like a game flâneur. I kind of go in and out of them and look at them as they become popular and important. This painting, *Dungeon map 8: Dungeons & Dragons gaming advertisements 1980s–2010s*, shows a grid of small, collaged ads for the game from different eras. Dungeons and Dragons, as you know, is one of the most important sources of ideas for virtual space. It's influenced pretty much every game. It's like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, which never goes away as a reference point for fantasy spaces. In these old ads, you see a computer game version, you see a board game version. It's the original role-playing game. All of the objects in this show could be thought of as dungeon artifacts or dungeon maps. The paintings that you see here in the studio are based on various different online spaces that exist between hardware and software. This painting is based on a computer chip and its gridded surfaces.

Rail: It calls to mind one of Peter Halley's Neo-Geo paintings from the 1980s.

Denny: Yes, Peter Halley is a major inspiration for me—one of his early works made in 1982 is included in a group show at Petzel which I

organized alongside my solo exhibition. This painting, *Dungeon map 4: Nvidia H100 chip* (2024), depicts a Nvidia chip that is used to train artificial intelligence, which makes it such an important cultural object. It recalls the cells in one of Halley's abstract, geometric images, which he might call dungeons. Nvidia chips and others like it were developed for gaming graphics—but then it turned out they were the hardware needed to run AI models and mine crypto. And next to it are some paintings made from images from *Worldwide Webb*, a game that looks like something that could have been made in 1985, but it's actually one of the newest, most popular games enabled by cryptocurrencies. And next to that is the world map from the movie *Barbie*

Rail: Is *Dungeon map 9: Barbie Real World Map* made from a screenshot from the movie?

Denny: Yes. One of the Barbies drew a map of the world when she ventured back into LA from Barbieland. This caused a famous controversy because it omitted many countries, including Vietnam and seemed to correspond to China's territorial claims. I thought that what was and wasn't included in that map was just very interesting. Japan's completely missing, as is New Zealand, by the way. The United States is, of course, very prominent, and Europe is very small, which I also thought was interesting. One hears a lot of bearish statements from US investors about the importance of Europe these days. It's interesting how geopolitics and economics may have infiltrated the *Barbie* movie. Here's another painting featuring an image of Earth as a "blue marble" taken from another prominent crypto game, *Dark Forest*. As you know, the image of our globe taken from space was one of the most famous and optimistic images from the 1960s. It was on the cover of Stewart Brand's famous *Whole Earth Catalog*, which first came out in 1968. I'm thinking about this strange succession, in which a kind of Dungeons & Dragons-style computer game creates a contemporary version of the optimistic, hippie-ish *Whole Earth Catalog* of countercultural ideas and things. That's why on top of this canvas, there's an early D&D Mattel Electronics Dungeons & Dragons Computer Labyrinth Game object, also encased in Plexiglas. It's like the D&D computer object is a spaceship enclosing on the *Dark Forest* Earth.

Rail: That's a strange paradox.

Denny: These works are much more dungeon-ey. *Dungeon artifact 1: Heroquest bookcase* (2024) and *Dungeon artifact 2: Heroquest rack* are blown-up objects from the board game HeroQuest, which was inspired by Dungeons & Dragons and was very popular in the late 1980s, early 1990s.

I made these miniature game pieces life-size. One is a kind of bookshelf, and the other is a torture rack. They both bring the dungeon space into our world and are made using different 3D-printing technologies. Some parts are 3D-printed plastic, others 3D-printed sand, which is often used to cast metal. Additionally, I have added different layers of oil paint and UV printing, so each becomes a weird hybrid object. It's a sculpture, but it's also a painting, a print, and an object directly outputted from the digital. Multimedia.

Rail: *Dungeon artifact 1: Heroquest bookcase* features an image of books that I imagine was a sticker on the original, tiny game piece.



Simon Denny, *Dungeon artifact 1: Heroquest bookcase*, 2024. Steel, PLA 3D print, oil on canvas, UV print, resin sand cast, 40.55 x 57.28 x 23.43 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Nick Ash.

Denny: Exactly. To me, it's a sculpture that speaks to all the knowledge that's involved in these virtual environments, and to all the knowledge that's contained on the internet and in companies that design the online spaces we inhabit. I made a show in 2015 for the Venice Biennale's New Zealand pavilion that was based on the graphics and cartoons that were used in the intelligence slides that Edward Snowden leaked. And I found them interesting because they were full of fantasy images.

Rail: Who was using fantasy imagery?

Denny: The National Security Agency (NSA), the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the British equivalent of the NSA, and also New Zealand intelligence agencies that were collaborating with the US and the UK. Cutesy, clipart-adjacent images were littered throughout Snowden's leaked slide decks.

Rail: Did they use fantasy imagery to model, what—their strategies?

Denny: Exactly. There was one example that I can remember from the GCHQ, which was about how to trick people online. It showed various different images of magicians, fantasy cards, and magic cards: Dungeons & Dragons-esque imagery—["The ART of DECEPTION."](#) That's when I started to think about how important this type of design and imagery was for technologists, not only in private companies, but also in national defense contexts.



Simon Denny, *Dungeon artifact 4: Palmer Luckey office display Anduril sword replica*, 2024. Epoxy resin, ground coffee, 51.97 x 10.63 x 2.36 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Nick Ash.

Rail: What is this work, *Dungeon artifact 4: Palmer Luckey office display Anduril sword replica* (2024)?

Denny: This is a cast made of the Andúril sword that inspired the name of the company founded by Palmer Luckey, the founder of Oculus VR, a virtual-reality headset company bought by Facebook, who's now become a defense-tech entrepreneur. This is a replica of the famous *Lord of the*

Rings sword that hangs on a wall in his company. But I cast this version out of coffee, which gives it a weird, wood-adjacent kind of plastickyness. And of course there's something about an active ingredient inside it that fits nicely in the context of dungeons.

Rail: Caffeine certainly played a significant role in the rise of capitalism. I imagine “rise and grind” software engineers slamming iced lattes as they crank out lethal swarming drone technologies. In his great 2021 book *This Is Your Mind on Plants*, Michael Pollan says that we use coffee to focus our minds, but coffee uses us to ensure that it's propagated all over the world.

Denny: It's like a paperclip maximizer. Do you know that story? Elon Musk has also mentioned this story, highlighting dangers of algorithmic systems and the places AI might be taking us. It's based on a thought experiment by Nick Bostrom: if you have an algorithm that only wants to produce paper clips, it could destroy the world by mindlessly creating them at the expense of everything else. The system itself doesn't know it's a negative thing because it's just producing paper clips. Maybe the real paper clip replicator is the office coffee machine, which enables workers to hyperfocus on their specializations at the expense of the bigger picture.

[Laughs] Coincidentally, the Enlightenment is also tied to the rise of coffee houses in Europe and financial mythologized dungeons like Lloyd's Coffee House. This painting, *Dungeon map 7: Anduril industries 'Fight Unfair' advertisement*, is made after one of Anduril's advertisements—a poster in the Burbank airport that shows a drone with titular phrase “Fight Unfair” emblazoned above it.

Rail: It feels bombastic, and isn't it creepy that this little terrifying airplane is in an ad at an airport?

Denny: Yeah, it's the Mojo Dojo Dungeon Casa House aesthetic that Ken introduces in *Barbie* when he gets to decorate. You see heavy metal posters, swords, and gaming equipment in his man cave.

Rail: What's that like to dive into this fantasy-world aesthetic, which seems so colored by violence and dark forces?

Denny: It's ever present. Every time I kind of look at the worlds of the people that make the systems that we all live under, this material is close. I just came out of a period of being very involved in the NFT world, where technologists' values met artistic values. The poster artist for that movement became the artist Beeple, who also made what I would call very Mojo Dojo Casa House imagery. You can't get around it; it's in your face. But it's not only the dungeon world. There are other kinds of non-dungeon

dungeons: This sculptural relief, *Dungeon map 3: Mall Madness board*, is another kind of blow-up. It's an image of a section of a board game called Mall Madness, which is seemingly kind of the opposite, agenda-wise, to the Anduril imagery. One of the versions of the games features Hannah Montana, and it brings you into a tabletop-scale mall in which, essentially, you go around buying things. That's the game. I also made a painting based on the game's board. The finish of the 3D-printed relief is very rough, almost gestural. It stands for another kind of dungeon, the kind of scripted space of a mall. And perhaps the space of Mall Madness is not so different from supposedly male-gendered, sword-and-skull online spaces.

Rail: Let's talk about the varying degrees of resolution in your new works. Some works are highly detailed. Others feel out of focus and almost woozy-making because you leave their 3D-printed surfaces in their raw state.

Denny: I'm interested in layering techniques. In paintings, lay down wet oil paint and then UV print on top of it. The printed element dries immediately, so I can rip into surfaces as I build them up. This way, you get a falling away of the digital part, in which it merges with the analog part.

Rail: But when you really dive into digital realms, for instance when you use Oculus Rift VR goggles or even spend too much time online, there's a kind of queasiness or emotional dyspepsia that accompanies the experience. Is evoking that part of your project?

Denny: I tried to capture some of that weirdness by making works that are partly painted and partly UV-printed, partly 3D-printed and partly sculpted, and that are strangely scaled or that incorporate misregistered imagery in which images are distorted or blurred. They're correct but also weirdly disembodied. Perhaps it's inspired by feeling somewhere between the supposedly virtual and the actual, or between kinetic warfare and gaming warfare. I'm trying to capture some of that uncanniness.

Rail: There's also something adolescent about these worlds. Going back to Grimes and her "War Is Coming" *Game of Thrones* T-shirt, it's something you would associate with a thirteen-year-old boy.

Denny: Right. [*Laughs*] There's definitely a kind of juvenilia there. There's a meme in the technology world: "It's very early, it's always very early." Crypto is always saying, oh, we're extremely early, we're just starting. It's been ten years, but we're still just starting. Maybe it's perpetually stuck in puberty?

Rail: The dungeon itself seems pubescent. It's all about power but also hiding. It's phallic and womb-like, the definition of an overdetermined space psychologically.

Denny: And therefore it may become easier to perform in it, as in social-media-like environments in which it's easier to get angry at somebody because it's removed from any real social context. It's easier to say something aggressive in those contexts because you're shielded from the consequences of what you're performing socially. It's as if growth were perpetually stilted.

Rail: Do you think about the possibility of escape from dungeon spaces, or are you not interested?

Denny: No, I don't know if it's interesting or not. I just don't see it, and I don't feel it in my own life. It's very hard to live outside of our systems. I'm inspired by art that brought me to understand how it feels to live in this world. I'm interested in the attitude of trying to take the world on as you experience it rather than to inscribe or design it as you would hope it to be. I just married somebody who was a crypto founder, and the people that I meet and I learn from through her are often people who are involved in these worlds. So I think I'm focused on how I feel about what's going on in a very visceral sense. And this is why making these kinds of artworks distills things for me.

Rail: It's so easy to feel powerless in the face of big tech's algorithms. And I know it's not the artist's job to lead us back to some sort of pre-fall world...

Denny: None of us this is a new idea, right? I think artists are often in tension between being fascinated by new, emerging things and by being resistant to them at the same time. There are, of course, many things that one should be cautious about. I think that Anduril is probably a very good business. But as a kind of relic of the world, it signals the rather unfortunate place that we're in. I'm not a fan of kinetic warfare. I come from a Quaker background, so the pacifist tradition is close to my heart. I think that there's something weird in the celebration of defense tech, which is being so embraced at the moment, brought so much to the fore these last couple of years. Living in Germany, with the Ukraine war, and with the conversations about the war on Gaza, at the moment, it's just unavoidable to see how one can be tangled up in this military-industrial morass.

Rail: It seems to me that giving uncanny vaporware worlds concrete, physical form is what you do.

Denny: Yeah, I maybe make this stuff more tangible, if I can. It's a way of trying to understand them. I'm trying to understand the world through its important cultural forms.

Rail: Are you a primitive of a new sensibility, then? I can imagine that your colleagues are building entirely digital worlds. By making physical objects that come from digital realms, are you slowing things down, saying, "wait a minute?"

Denny: I'm actually saying it's always both. When I started to make shows in the early 2010s, there was a group making so-called post-internet art to which I was partly attached. One of the things we used to talk about amongst each other was how tangible the internet was, which was interesting because we all imagined, I think, that we were making work for the internet. But we were all also making objects that were in galleries, that were in museums. I found it incredibly productive to think that by making something digital tangible, I was saving a part of a moment. I think the internet is both very physical and very virtual at the same time. It's an incredible cluster of energy and wires and satellites, heavy, big, material things. But the experience of it can be very, very abstracted, very immaterial. The things that keep these machines going, these little portals that we have in our hands all the time, are very much material objects. At the same time, they take us to a very ephemeral space. Downloading something and saving it or putting it in some kind of new format—a sculpture or a painting, perhaps—that is not attached to the internet is a way of snapshotting and keeping it.

Rail: I think about when people tried to print out the internet in the 1990s.

Denny: Yeah, exactly. It's like that. It's about trying to select and isolate things to distill a feeling or a moment of the internet right now—and also to connect that to a past to build some kind of story. It's capturing the ephemeral, and that's something that art has done very well for a long time. Whether it's a snapshot or a sketch or—it's something that artists do: they capture ephemeral things, feelings, and make relics that memorialize them. This is the de-virtualizing we've been talking about—the act of making something clunky and material out of something digital and virtual. I feel like I'm working in that tradition.

Rail: Can you describe your overall approach? It's not satire.

Denny: It's more searching. Satire has a point. I don't try to have a punchline. I'm just grappling with the things that are around me that seem

to be important.

Rail: Again, I know it's not fair to expect artists to be sages, but I think of you as somebody who has an unusual perspective on states of consciousness today.

Denny: Well, thank you.

Rail: What are your prognostications about the state of our world, where a digital takeover seems inevitable and so many of us feel like shit when we look at social media or spend a lot of time in online information spaces?

Denny: I think there have been different moments. When I first encountered social media, I didn't feel like shit; I found it exciting. And very productive. It connected me and my artist friends. But then I think, you know, 2024's experience of social media is not 2011's experience of social media. It just isn't. It's a different thing. It's a dynamic world. And it's changed a lot. I do think it might be a darker world today for some of us than what it was in 2011. I do think I feel more dungeon-adjacent than I felt then. I think that's a common feeling among peers. I also feel that those are the worlds that social media has given us in terms of information. But there are certain artists and works of art that give us inspiration and show us how to find a way to beauty. And there's others that, I think, articulate that feeling of being trapped in those systems, darker things.

Rail: How do you give yourself high-quality online feeds?

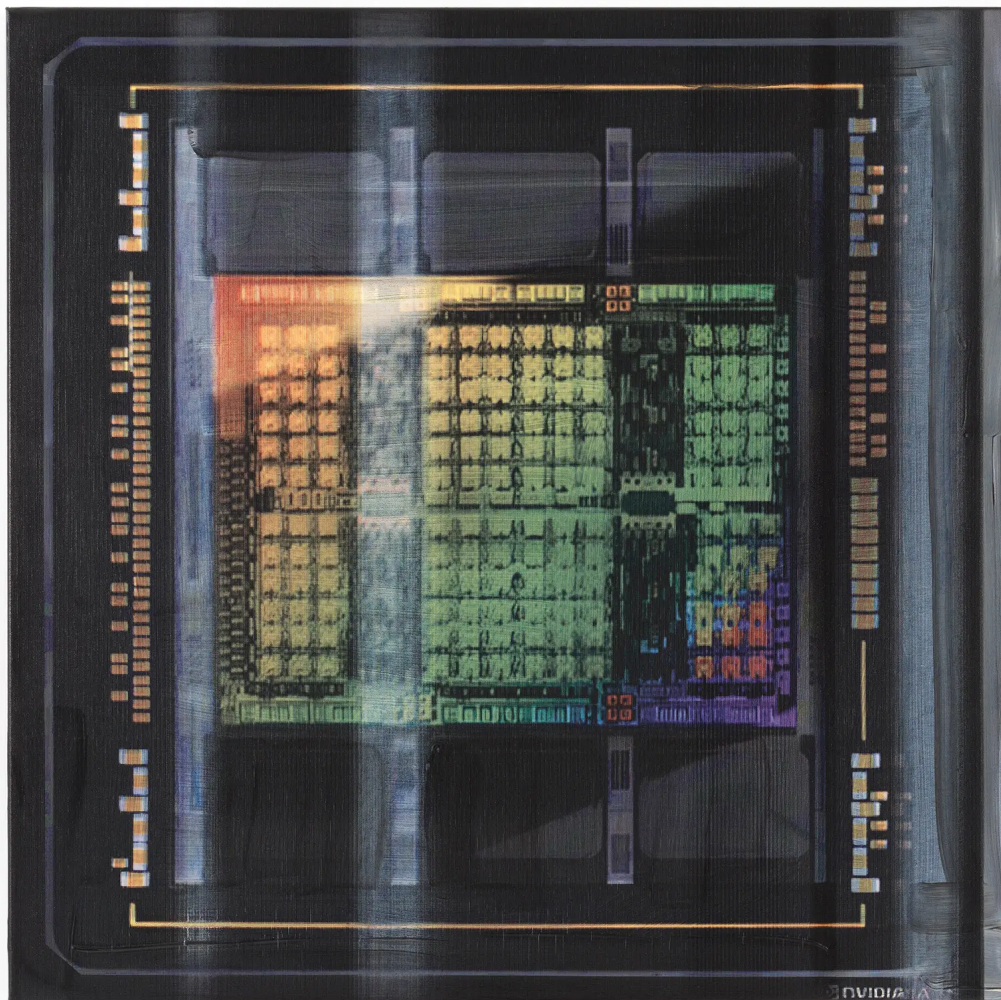
Denny: My strategy's changed quite a lot because I think the nature of the design of those dungeons has shifted. At first, when I started using social media, I was optimizing for interesting people in my world: people and artists I'm thinking about, who were really doing something interesting at the time on Facebook, which was my main profile system at first. When things switched over to Instagram in the art world, it was harder to control the feed. Around 2016 it was clear that the feed changed from chronological to something algorithmically designed. Also, that was the moment when I think politics changed a lot in terms of its tone. Political conversations became a lot more aggressive around that time. I tried to listen to and optimize for things that I disagreed with to try and inform myself about things I found difficult to understand. Now I just feel muddled. I don't know how to optimize those feeds anymore. I don't know what it means to try and optimize them. And I feel much more passenger-like, in those worlds. I feel like I'm navigating a mall that I didn't design. You know, when I go into a shop in the mall, I feel like I'm drawn around

by some kind of other force other than my own feelings. I don't think I'm choosing. The systems now feel a little bit more like that to me, you know?

Rail: You must encounter people like me who find these online dungeon-worlds scary.

Denny: I think the world's rather scary. It's a very uncertain time. I think, to me, it feels like we're on the precipice of something monumental and not totally positive, but I don't know if that's something that everybody could have foreseen. I don't know if it was birthed by the systems I'm looking at, or if these systems are just expressing the path of the world. It's hard to be causal about these things, but I do think it feels like quite a dark moment. This is why dungeon objects and dungeon maps speak to me in a way that they haven't before. Today, it seems urgent to try to grapple with what a dungeon means.

Rail: Do you have a tool or a strategy for gathering ideas?



Simon Denny, *Dungeon map 4: Nvidia H100 chip*, 2024. Oil and UV print on canvas, 39.37 x 39.37 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Nick Ash.

Denny: I do a lot of collecting of images and files, but I also talk to people a lot, which is another really important part of my practice. I talk to people about what interests and moves them. This, alongside collecting information and objects, becomes a kind of layering that's perhaps not so different from the process behind some of my paintings—material things, in this case thick paint, with information, here a digital film, that goes over the top. The painting *Dungeon map 4: Nvidia H100 chip*, which we've spoken about before, combines oil paint and UV digital print technology. If you put the print on top of a thick impasto of wet oil paint, it dries immediately and kind of creates a surface film that you can manipulate. It's about trying to scratch through these surfaces and reveal part of what's underneath.

Rail: I think of Wade Guyton's computer-printed paintings.

Denny: I'm a big fan of Wade's work, and I find the way that he used those earlier UV-printing machines and unpacked the idea of what an image file is really interesting. But Wade creates his surfaces using printers alone. He never uses paint, as far as I know. I wanted to slam the physical painted surface together with a digitally printed surface.

Rail: Again, that out-of-focus aspect of the sculptures is present in the paintings.

Denny: Exactly. It's a little wrinkled. But in the Nvidia microchip image, there's something about its grid that connects it to dungeon maps. You know, it's like the Dungeons & Dragons advertising slogan "deep down, you may not survive." And it's interesting to consider how defense-tech firms advertise themselves. There are the slogans that could be from *Dungeons & Dragons*. Anduril's "Fight Unfair" slogan shows the connection to and cultural impact of the *Dungeon* world and how it meets the contemporary defense-tech world. If we're talking about the way that the information space works these days and why political conversations have become seemingly so much more aggressive, I think it's related to the way the information economy has discovered ways to drive and utilize attention. It sticks in the mind. It's that coffee bean.

Rail: Psychology shows that humans have a negativity bias. All things being equal, negative things get your attention and affect your psychological state more than positive or neutral things.

Denny: Exactly. You're describing something that I think has informed my decision to focus on this dungeon idiom. This aggression is in the air. It's

so present and so celebrated, even miles away from the architects of the online world this aggression becomes visible within. It's the Anduril made of coffee. It's taking up so much of our attention, and people seem to want it, to vote for it. I'm in a country, Germany, that has been celebrated by many voices for how well it's dealt with its past. Now, recently, the hard right, the AfD, or Alternative for Germany, is on the rise. I find it very scary, the emergence of a party that says in some forums that they want to expel all foreigners. Part of what attracted me to living here when I was an art student at the Städelschule in Frankfurt was that it seemed like a very liberal place. A place that was very aware of a past that they would never want to come back to.

Rail: Germany's antiauthoritarian alarm bells always had hair triggers, and they're ringing now—far louder than in America, it seems.

Denny: Yeah. As I make these things, I'm wondering "why is this coming back?" Why is an authoritarian turn being celebrated in so many contexts? It seems at times to be adjacent to invocations of the mystical, the superstitious—as it has been in the past.

Rail: I often think we're living in a folkloric era. Despite our ability to document exactly what people say and how so many things have happened, truth is out the window. Rumors and lies prevail and opinion and gut feelings have replaced fact and objectivity.

Denny: Right. That's codified into the invocation of these mythological dungeons that don't exist, but then because they're a part of a certain group of people's imaginaries, they then inform the worlds we all have to inhabit. There's something about the centralness of these idioms in this history of the internet that now feels so close to the surface. This is the connection I'm trying to grapple with.

Rail: Again, resistance seems futile.

Denny: Right. Despite it all, I'm gonna jump on social media and promote my exhibition or put a "like" in here and there or survey what's going on in my art scene—through these dungeons. That's exactly why calling my approach satire doesn't really fit. I'm too embedded in the dungeon to be satirical about it. It's hard to quantify, but one pathway might be by turning to visceral experience. One of the things that has come into my life recently is my wife's dog. I got to know it as I got to know her. I would have never chosen to have a dog. But now I know all these amazing things about touching the dog, tickling the dog, the dog licking me, all these non-virtual things—tangible things that are very immediate. This is one

little antidote to being stuck in the dungeon. But then again, yeah, the internet is full of images of cute puppies, and then I'm back on the feed, looking at dachshunds, feeling very connected to that object. Where does the real puppy stop and the virtual puppy start? That question has kind of infected my nervous system.

Rail: Pardon my French—total mindfuck.

Denny: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

Rail: But certainly the question of being present or not present, or letting oneself get stuck in a dungeon construct that is in the end a state of mind, is not new. Ancient Buddhist literature is full of stories of people who weren't mindful, weren't ever really there.

Denny: I think part of being an artist is trying to make sense of the world. It's using the tools of the present as they emerge to try and do something that describes the feeling of now. That's my short version of the tradition of contemporary art that I feel a part of. And that was the inspiration for my recent exhibitions *Metaverse Landscapes* at the Kunstverein Hannover and the Frans Masereel Centrum in Kasterlee, Belgium, last year. I tried to use this idiom of landscape painting: my images, they are images of landscapes in a certain sense, because they're literally paintings of parcels of digital land. As I started that series, one of the things in my mind was the history of landscape painting, and its relationship to constructing the commercial system that still governs property on that land mass—how land sales became commerce. In New Zealand, with its colonial history, people were commissioned to do landscape paintings that would create the imaginary of established power and wealth that the settler wanted. And they have these interesting distortions of what that space looks like, using idioms imported from established systems in Europe. In them—and perhaps in my current work in general—you get this strange virtual/non-virtual dichotomy: power structures migrate between historical fantasy formats and actual realities.

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