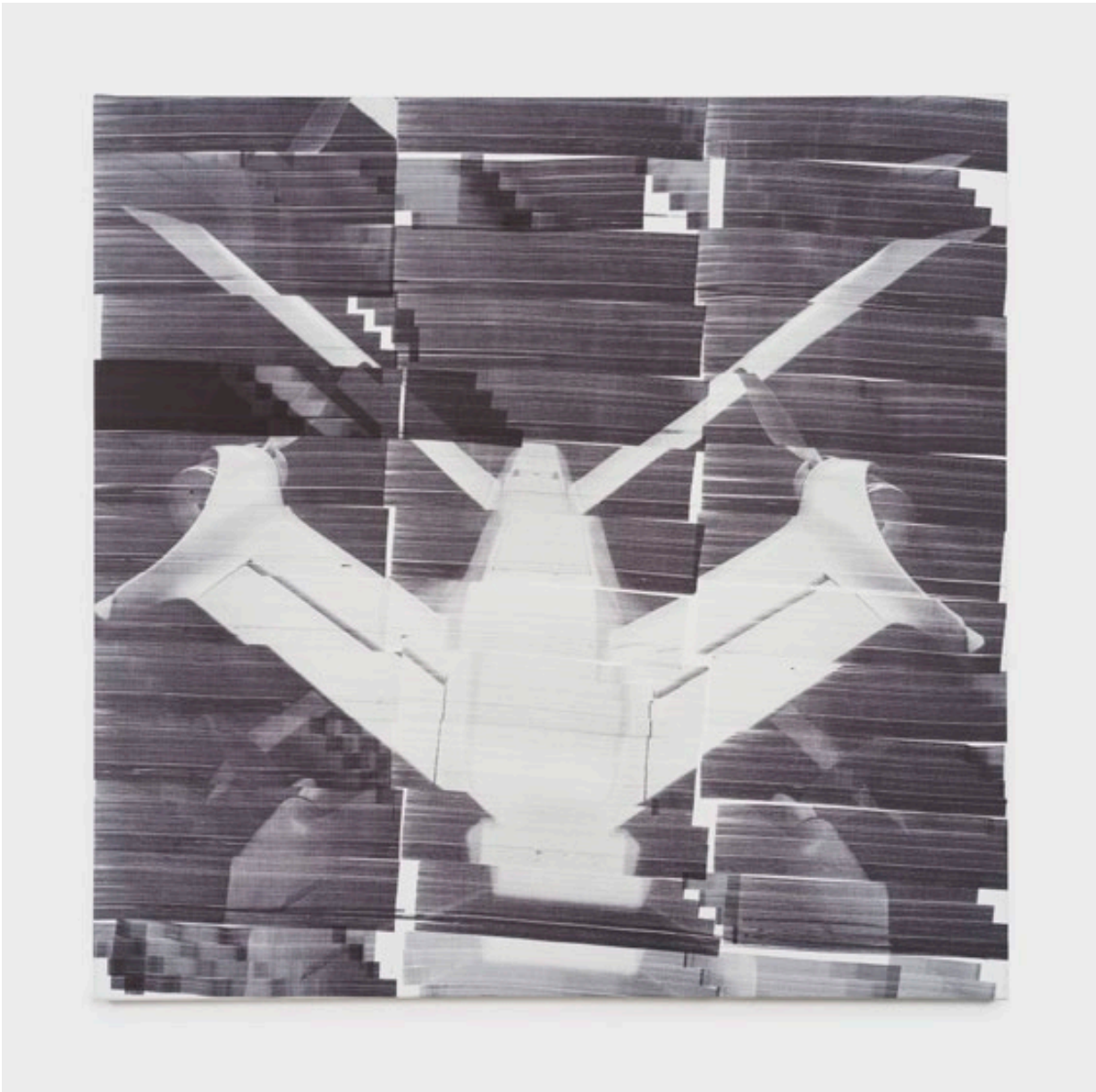


Canon Fodder

Simon Denny in conversation
with Alex Estorick

If avant-garde thinking is premised on a cult of progress that no longer feels credible, Simon Denny has spent his career tracking the accelerationist tendencies of corporate interests who view technology through a utopian lens. His latest series of machine-assisted paintings riff on the move-fast-break-things mentality of Italian Futurism as well as the seductive marketing behind a surging defense industry. Ahead of his new exhibition in a conference room of the JW Marriott Hotel Berlin, presented with Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, the artist sat down with Alex Estorick to discuss how he is using canon as a medium.



Helsing HX-2, Above, 2025
Hand-held thermal inkjet on primed canvas
120 × 120 cm

ALEX ESTORICK

SIMON DENNY

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For your latest works you're playing with a range of different machines to paint and print images generated by AI that you have trained on works by the Futurists as well as contemporary advertising. Is this a new kind of history painting?

There are two different series: one in color and the other in black and white. For the color, I'm producing machine-assisted paintings using different plotters – one usually used for drawing with a pen and the other for wood engraving – which I've adapted to dip and paint with a brush, so all the paint gestures are mechanically produced. I use quite a square brush and then I layer over the results with a vertical inkjet printer.

The second strand of production uses a handheld printer gun that is designed to apply inkjet prints as labels onto boxes. I started using it because I liked the gestural requirement to “drag” the printer across the surface to produce the image. Gesture is absent in most digital printing, but with this device it's sort of unavoidable. There is also something about the device that rhymes with Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotographic gun, a photographic motion capture device from the 19th century that produced technical imagery that Futurism was in dialogue with.

Your two series seem to address different domains of images – the human and the nonhuman. The colorful works invoke the visual idiom and militarized rhetoric of Futurism, while the monochrome works are both lyrical and clinical. In the past, referencing Futurism might have been regarded as trite but, in a world defined by hyperbolic social media cycles and extremist politics, it feels necessary. Your layering of different technical processes and historical references points to the excess of information that humans are forced today.

There's something about speed that resonates; both political speed and historical speed feel important. Scary and awesome things seem front and center, while things are changing in the technical world that bleed into art as well as conflict. The cost of producing images is different and the origin of images is more complex than when the internet first scaled. I'm reaching for a gut impact but also trying not to ignore the complexity and illegibility of how new images are made after the naturalization of AI, as well as the way history seems all jumbled up.

For the monochrome series you've used an inkjet printer that is designed to print QR codes – images that are only readable by machines. To me, they hint at the aporia of a world in which humans increasingly lack oversight, where images emerge from latent space.

Right now, I'm mostly using promotional images from defense tech companies such as Helsing, Palantir, and Anduril that use AI to produce peopleless machines to fight wars. I'm also creating composite images that remind one of the history of art and the language of modernism. The art of that period really images change and disruption in a powerful way that seems both distant and close. Futurism, Cubism, Vorticism and other avant-gardes that described an alienation from technical experience can give us prompts to parse through today's hardware and software. Maybe we end up looking at the past in a way that is unfamiliar while finding a language for some of those experiences now.

Watching your painting machines at work, the noise is deafening. It reminds me of Filippo Marinetti's Futurist poem *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1912). But the plotters also have a precision that expresses a natively digital process; these feel like paintings from a digital place.

NFTs renewed painting for me as a format. Coming from that context, one of the reasons I wanted to start making paintings was the recent jump in what you can do with manipulating machines. New niche-consumer devices afford the possibility of interpolating the gesture and sumptuousness of painting at one step removed. Right now, it feels as though we are seeing a hobbyist market in the way people are able to hack machines and buy big plotters and CNC machines more easily. AI image-making is also widely available. I was aiming for something that maintained a level of rigidity and pixelation – the suggestion of something mechanical – while also clearly reading as brushstrokes.



Left page above:
Output 0764, 2025
Plotted acrylic and inkjet on canvas
120 x 120 cm

Left page below:
Helsing Flower, Full, 2025
Hand-held thermal inkjet on primed canvas
120 x 120 cm

This page:
Output 0216, 2025
Plotted acrylic and inkjet on canvas
120 x 120 cm



Anduril Bolt-M, 2025
Hand-held thermal inkjet on primed canvas
120 × 120 cm

ALEX ESTORICK

SIMON DENNY

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Your use of “pixelation” feels strategic in the sense that you’re taking the language of pixel art, historically a marginal field of commercial art, and repurposing it for the world of mainstream contemporary art. You’ve also adopted the plotter, which is a machine rooted in early computer art. It feels like an arch attempt at synthesizing different canons.

Yeah, bringing all that into dialogue with Futurist ways of working felt important. There’s a history of mainframe computers at research institutions in liberal mid-century America being put in dialogue with artists who produced incredible drawings made with machines. That history says something about its time, but it also feels like a lost world. Seeing creators on YouTube hacking plotters together to make ASMR-ish videos as well as peers from the world of NFTs revisiting technologies that were being used to make digital art in the 1960s is very compelling to me. I want to join that conversation and reinforce the value of what’s being done there, but I also want to connect it with things I value from art that’s often outside the core interests of that community.

If histories of progress are no longer credible, is it still possible to identify instances of avant-gardism at the intersections of art, design, science, etc.?

The myth of the avant-garde is still very compelling, especially when you don’t feel in sync with where things are at. I feel that training datasets for AI is a form of history building that reaches from the past in order to deploy to the present, which has resonance with canon-building. Futurism is a story that has been told by different people in different ways at different times – here emphasizing its political allegiances, there underscoring its commitment to disruption and innovation. It’s been a training set for many different things.

In these new paintings, the past is used to produce the new in a way that is beyond appropriation, collage, and single-point perspective, but also contains parts of all those things. That’s how AI images feel to me because they’re not lens-based but they are both generative and representational, while also involving abstraction. The way that AI images behave – what they do and how they do it – is something we’re still figuring out. You know that they are not produced from a camera, so there is a distancing that comes with that, but they are natively networked imagery that turns canon-building into a medium.

When you produce an image like a cat with a platform like Midjourney, the AI image generator pulls from what it has mapped and synthesizes it together from tags and other identifiable elements into a collage that doesn’t look like a collage. There is illusionism there but at the same time those engines are reaching toward something that looks closer to images we already know because their designers want us to see the familiar in the outputs; they want us to see an already existing style or canon of image-making. There’s conservatism as well as radicality – perhaps a radical conservatism – to the process of synthesizing everything on the web and pulling out a median. That is not how images were created in the past.

Talking about the production of discrete images feels almost anachronistic in a world where vast flows of images are fueling machine-learning algorithms. At a moment when all digital images are being collapsed into data, are we witnessing an inevitable merging of the canons of painting and photography?

We’ve spoken about Marey’s gun, but in general his photography was a challenge to painting at the turn of the 20th century as well as an inspiration for the Futurists. Meanwhile Eadweard Muybridge was a product of Silicon Valley in the sense that his images of horses were commissioned by Leland Stanford, whose ranch became Stanford University – one of the most important sites of invention and production for technology business, then for gold and mining, and now for software and defense tech. Muybridge’s photographs were disruptive for painters who were reaching for a language to describe the present and the future, which drove a move-fast-break-things approach to representation.

There is no such thing as offline and online, we’re always both. This dissolution of where we are in space is extremely tangible, maybe more so than when the Futurists were working. We can be in many



Output 1076, 2025
Plotted gouache and inkjet on canvas
60 × 80 cm



Output 0764, 2025
Plotted acrylic and inkjet on canvas
120 × 120 cm



ALEX ESTORICK

SIMON DENNY

Do you think that your new paintings are capable of containing the levels of layered criticality that you're expressing here?

I don't know. I also don't know that art can always do that. Art is a weird thing whose meaning one cannot really control. Artists are compelled to produce gestures for their own reasons but meaning-making is social and other processes decide what artworks really mean. I made a series of works back in 2017 that used the language of fantasy board games to map the ideology of Peter Thiel and his community, which is now so influential on the regime in the US. I couldn't have known that Thiel himself would respond positively to the work at the same time as people around me saw a critical story in it that was pointing out something dangerous.

ALEX ESTORICK

With this new series, you make explicit reference to the *aeropittura* ("aeropainting") of the Futurist second wave of the 1930s, which coincided with Mussolini's consolidation of power. You're also exhibiting these works in a wood-paneled, marble conference room of an international hotel that overlooks the Bendlerblock, part of the German Ministry of Defense as well as a site of military resistance to the Nazi regime on a street named after Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg.

SIMON DENNY

In my practice, I not only make particular objects but I also show them in particular places. With everybody in Europe thinking about what it means to defend democracy and with all these questions around rearmament and militarism emerging, I thought it was a potent place to show these works first. There is actually a museum within the Bendlerblock that is literally about what it means to be complicit. There is also a modernist icon called the Shell-Haus ("Shell House") nearby that was built in the 1920s prior to modernism being thwarted and co-opted by the Nazis. Galerie Der Sturm hosted exhibitions of works by the Italian Futurists on the very same street. This is the site where I want these questions to resonate.

ALEX ESTORICK

It seems to me that machine learning is, in one sense, a machine for repurposing media as well as a machine by which history is instrumentalized. As an arch repurposer of media yourself, in a battle between Simon Denny and ChatGPT, who wins?

Hah, I don't know if I win. The question is what to do when you are living in symbiosis with machines that rely on pattern recognition that flattens meaning to the point where conspiracy theories are as strong as any other type of truth logic. One thing to take from the Futurists is that when you use the new without knowing what it is – as you have to do when you use the new – sometimes you don't know what you're getting and sometimes you don't know who's winning.

Anduril ALTIUS-600 in Action, 2025
Plotted fountain pen and inkjet on paper
32.5 × 42.5 cm (framed)

Simon Denny working in the studio with converted CNC plotter painting machine, 2025

All images courtesy of the artist, Petzel Gallery, and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler.
Photos: Nick Nash