

FORCES OF THE UNKNOWN: SIMON DENNY ON THE MILITARIZED IMAGINATION AND POWER OF PLOTTER PAINTINGS

Interview by Alexander Burenkov



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Forces of the Unknown, exhibition view, 2025. @ JW Marriott Hotel Berlin, Salon 12-13. © 2025 Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler

In "Forces of the Unknown", Simon Denny continues to probe the hidden architectures of power, this time by aligning the logics of contemporary image-making with the technological systems that increasingly govern both military and civilian life. Staged in collaboration with Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler in the liminal and loaded space of the JW Marriott Hotel in Berlin, the exhibition presents a new body of work that not only scrutinizes current entanglements between tech and defense industries, but also reflects on the blurred boundaries between human agency and algorithmic automation.

The setting is no accident: a hotel conference room, a site of corporate diplomacy and transient luxury, becomes a speculative theatre for militarized aesthetics and post-digital production. Denny's custom-built tools—ranging from modified CNC machines to industrial inkjet printers typically used for labeling crates—extend his ongoing exploration of media archeology and systems aesthetics. In these paintings, the mechanized and the handmade coexist uneasily: marks appear intentional yet procedural, intimate yet outsourced. The images themselves are less easily classifiable. Rather than offering straightforward diagrams or infographics (a familiar strategy in Denny's earlier work), the new works operate as painterly abstractions charged with institutional subtext. Their surfaces are textured with traces of invisible labor, logistics infrastructure, and the shifting visual regimes of data and control.

Simon Denny's latest machine-assisted paintings—created shortly after his appointment as a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit—explore the visual confusion brought about by AI-generated imagery in a time when historical narratives appear increasingly fragmented. Rather than withdrawing into critique or retreating from technological engagement, "Forces of the Unknown" advances a model of artistic production that is embedded, responsive, and structurally attuned to the overlapping domains of innovation, governance, and resistance.

ALEXANDER BURENKOV: Your recent turn to painting—mediated through machines (mechanic plotters) but unmistakably anchored in questions of authorship and material presence—suggests a strategic reorientation of post-digital practice. In doing so, you embrace a hybrid artistic landscape—one that fuses analogue and digital forms and demands clarity within complexity, without collapsing into vagueness. How does this hybridity affect not just your medium, but also the kinds of meaning your artworks aim to generate or disrupt? And what drew you to painting as a medium for this project, especially given your longstanding interest in systems and digital infrastructures?

SIMON DENNY: I think the moment demanded a way of working that was, as you said, many things at once, so maybe hybrid in that sense. I wanted something that was gestural and energetic, yet mechanical; contemporary but also conservative; new but also anachronistic. These paintings are a response to the call for a reassessment of the culture surrounding building computational products, drawing on sources such as Marc Andreessen's "Techno-Optimist Manifesto" and Alex Karp's "The Technological Republic". These are some of the figures who are most enthusiastically theorizing and evangelizing the embrace of a more patriotic, Schmidtian shift in culture around technology companies in California and beyond – the "vibe shift" stuff. The texts both draw on artistic idioms in service of their message – Andreessen on Italian Futurism, and Karp using a wider variety of artistic figures in a call for an "aesthetic position." My paintings respond to that shift in tone and message, that leveraging of art interpretation. This is in part what drew me to painting, but I also felt something that could seem more ambiguous as a visual language than the quasi-diagrammatic formats I have worked with in the past was also called for. Painting languages are loaded with history for the literate, but also speak to different people in different, more immediate ways – in that way, they can include a lot. They are also more readily interpreted as something that somehow inherently carries feeling. So my painting draws on these capabilities of the medium – but also augments those expectations by using printers, plotters, LoRAs, etc. to compose and execute them. The images in them are derived from advertising, and from a kind of productive, associative misreading of historical visual styles of painting.

AB: The works evoke the rhetoric of Italian Futurism and the fractured visual logic of Cubism. What drew you to these specific historical avant-gardes, and how do they resonate with today's networked, multi-perspectival reality?

SD: Right, exactly – this is what I mean. I think it's interesting that Andreessen saw so much value in revisiting Italian Futurism recently. I think its fractured picture planes, notions of trying to describe a disruptive present, are related adjacently to and embrace the newest technologies – both addressing photography and scientific image making, but also in its dramatization of the consumer tech of the time, cars, and later planes. The way artists like Balla tried to capture the discombobulating, difficult violence of speed. The development of "lines of force" as a mode of working for capturing visually how this violent speed felt. Then the latter Aeropainters' attempt at describing "an absolutely new reality which has nothing in common with reality as traditionally constituted". I can see why this is an alluring idiom for people looking for languages to describe things that are not even understandable to the people producing them – like the people in the position of both making and sort of witnessing the emergence of AI products, in a Labatutian sense. David Holz is recorded on a Discord at the inception of Midjourney saying "I think [Midjourney] is not a picture maker. This is a new medium that no one really understands". And obviously also Italian Futurism's analogous embrace of war technologies as something productive, something to be celebrated, could be I imagine very useful when trying to find positive languages to speak about weapons production in.

For me, revisiting Futurism also added this complication/value around how it has been historicized, the stories that it's been used for. The interpretation and use of the history of Futurism both within its initial immediate political context in Italy from 1909-1945, but also, its historicization and interpretation within Liberal modernist stories in the US and Western Europe in the post-war period. And now, questions around Futurism's story being retold in today's Italy has also potentially shifted that post-war narrative. I think all the possible questions around complicity and the political usage of Futurism makes it very useful for me today.

AB: By employing mechanical plotters to create your paintings, you're reconfiguring what authorship and gesture mean in painting. Do you see this as a challenge to traditional notions of artistic intentionality, or as a continuation of them through other tools?

SD: I think I see this all as quite continuous with the post-war liberal dialogue between art and technology and how that was used in relationship to authorship and gesture. Plotters were one of the first tools used by artists in the mid-20th century to work with computation. Artists went into liberal research centers, often in dialogue with programs that were adjacent to Cold War military funding, and plotters were a way to work with computer instructions and turn them into mark-making. Notions of generative art were also being worked with at this time. Artists were using computers to design protocols and seeing what those protocols would produce. And this can be seen as informed by earlier avant-garde strategies, for example, from Dada and Surrealism, of working with the unknown, with chance – creating rule-based systems and processes and then manipulating the “found” results. And then there’s all the later computational artwork right up to today’s Generative AI and NFT worlds, that could be framed as extending these methodologies in various directions. I think in general working with AI tools has a productive chance element built into its current interface: one prompts, and then one sees what one gets. You don’t totally know or control what the output is. One can tweak a prompt, but the gap between the high dimensionality of the language prompt and what it triggers in the system has a lot of space for creative and productive misinterpretation and so-called “hallucination”. The plotter is perhaps further down the relative agency chain; it’s a simpler, more direct tool – but when it is working on interpreting AI-generated imagery, it’s like a simpler vector space translating from a more dense and complex vector space.

AB: In these recent series at stake is not just the representation of military-tech partnerships but a deeper reckoning with the aesthetics of opacity. What does it mean to paint with the same tools used to stamp and brand packages in global supply chains? What emerges when images are made through automated gestures but imbued with political and cultural specificity? You explore the “illegibility” of images in the age of AI and stage these questions through a carefully calibrated ambiguity: your works are neither endorsements nor critiques, but rather propositions—artworks that visualize systems by inhabiting their processes and tools. How do you see this confusion or ‘jumbled’ quality reflecting the way history is currently being written—or rewritten—by machine-generated content?

SD: The sort of hyper-real-ness of AI “slop” outputs, where image products like OpenAI and Midjourney seem like an ironic uncanny, contain and jumble stories of the past, but in an order that we might not recognize, or might not quite be able to interpret. These outputs can read as light yet menacing, graphically sophisticated but also narrow at the same time. One can feel that they don’t operate the same as photographs, or even recent 3D illustrations, which could seem like a similar or related aesthetic. I think we sense the loss of the referent, of indexical-ness to these images intuitively. The strong fakeness of it all can feel compellingly jumbled and confusing. In a Flusserian sense, AI “devours texts and spits out technical images... devours history and spits out post-history”. I think trying to distill some of those feelings into my strange mechanical paintings without directly using that ‘slop’ aesthetic has been a productive challenge. Its fakeness is part of what feels knowing and enjoyable about it. And indeed, the opacity in terms of meaning of these images has been exploited effectively by many actors, including political actors.

AB: In a moment marked by rearmament and political tension across Europe, what responsibility—or opportunity—does the artist have in reflecting or reframing these conditions?

SD: Living in Germany, the conversation around rearmament is omnipresent in the press and in casual public discourse. Suddenly, the go-to cultural political logic of yesteryear is treated as counterintuitive. It’s not “Germany should be the most cautious in rearming because of the atrocities of the Second World War, they can never fully be trusted” it’s, “Germany has been complacent and should have led the pathway to an independent, secure Europe decades ago through higher military spending”. There’s a kind of re-enchantment seemingly wanted now for the whole population with the military. So, I don’t know whether I frame that in terms of responsibility or opportunity, but it’s certainly a powerful and remarkable change that has taken place, and what that means as a cultural signal is still being worked out. It also rhymes with the narrative flip in Silicon Valley – maybe exemplified by A16Z’s American Dynamism, the advertising copy of Anduril and very clearly laid out in Karp’s “Technological Republic”. These texts describe a world where the common logic of the mid-2010s of a kind of polite distance kept from explicit military contracts is now cast as frivolous, and the consumer products of Web 2.0 are narrativized as trivial compared to the noble duty of contributing to more impactful projects like designing military AI and domestic robotics industrialization.

AB: By choosing a hotel rather than a traditional gallery space, you situate the viewer inside a compressed field of temporary occupation—mirroring the condition of contemporary geopolitics, where strategies are improvised, alliances contingent, and visibility always managed. “Forces of the Unknown” takes place in a highly symbolic location and the proximity to state institutions and memory sites further sharpens the stakes. The paintings do not document a conflict; they exist in its orbit, as afterimages of the techno-industrial complex’s aesthetic grammar. How did the JW Marriott’s proximity to the German Defense Department and the Resistance Memorial shape your thinking around the exhibition?

SD: Exactly, I was thinking about adjacency. I wanted the work to be close to where decisions about defense were being made (the Ministry), where notions of complicity are addressed culturally (the Memorial Center), without the work being actually inside of either institution. Other adjacencies around that neighborhood also informed my decision to look for a venue there. Two important exhibitions of Italian Futurism happened in Berlin in the first half of the 20thC which I wanted to also resonate with – one was in 1912 with a focus on the early Futurists at the avant-garde modernist gallery Der Sturm, and the other was in 1934 at the Flechtheim Gallery with the focus on the later Aeropainting – which played a role in solidifying anti-Futurist sentiment among the formalizing Nazi aesthetic. Anyway, both of these exhibitions took place within a few blocks of the site of the current J W Marriott.

AB: How do you see the relationship between military-industrial technologies and contemporary art production evolving today?

SD: I mean, there are many lenses one can see that through, I guess. One of the things that I have always been interested in from contemporary art is explicit in the label – it exists in and addresses the contemporary world. That world is technologically embedded – our experiences are made through and with technological products. I am a fan of artists that include and address these with the technologies of their time – which is one of the things I find compelling about Futurism. But lots of art at least from modernism on have addressed contemporary technical experience. This means often that one is working somehow in relation to the military-industrial context. As is well known we wouldn't have the internet or many contemporary platforms and tools without military funding and development paradigms. Again, I think the fact that Futurism made this relationship so explicit is remarkable and useful.

AB: Were there specific case studies or recent developments—like collaborations between tech companies and defense contractors—that informed this body of work?

SD: Yes – mostly this central tendency in influential parts of the Silicon Valley communities where politics, business and military forces have been explicitly reframed and reaffirmed. As mentioned above, for me the stories told by A16z, Anduril, Palantir, Founders Fund – articulated in the texts I have named already – were the things that precipitated my work in this moment, with these tools. Again, the fact that an aesthetic program is also so much a part of it – evident in A16Z's Deco-ish rebranding, Anduril's use of WWII-adjacent armament campaign posters mixed with contemporary styles alluding to gaming and Japanese animation, and Palantir's use of MOMA-derived branding "the Palantir Museum of Art" in their investor address event in May. All this visual context is now inseparable from the pro-military messaging as a core strain of this new cultural alliance.

AB: Can you talk about the custom-built tools you used—modified CNC machines, reprogrammed plotters, industrial inkjet printers—and how they influence the final aesthetic of the works?

SD: I used a few different pieces of hardware and then some software to produce these paintings. There are two series – one which is black and white, and based on existing images published by Defense Tech companies. For those works, I use a hand-held inkjet printer that is designed to label boxes or put QR codes on crates in an industrial context. These printers print straight onto an object, dragging toner directly across surfaces, triggered by a kind of rotary switch that activates as you pull it. They're not really intended for making images with– the results are noisy and full of relics of the process. One cannot produce an image with this tool that does not contain traces of both the apparatus and the operator's movement. Also, it looks like a kind of gun – it has a trigger. All these things were resonant for me with this Futurist context in mind – Futurists tried to capture movement and were inspired by Maray and Muybridge, late 19thC photographers who also worked with trying to find a scientific language using photography to capture movement. So, using this captured movement in this very direct, contemporary way was somehow procedural and lyrical, digital and analogue at the same time.

The other series of paintings is in color, and uses adapted plotters and CNC routers to mechanically paint with brushes, and mixes that with a color "wall printer" Ink Jet process between layers. For this, I worked with an artist friend to develop special scripts that were able to turn any image into a set of instructions for the plotting machines – use x size brush to paint for y distance with Z number of dipping intervals back into the paint, etc. All these machines are kind of readily available now, and relatively cheap because of the contemporary possibilities of hardware in the wake of the Shenzhen phenomenon. The scripts are pretty hack-y and were worked on iteratively – I was able to really learn how to use these techniques, to develop a new language, as I was experimenting with the process. The imagery I use for the color works is derived from AI processes – I trained a few LoRAs in a ComfyUI environment, adapting other people's open source LoRAs by adding and weighting key images in their make-up from Giacomo Balla, Tulio Crali. And then, I also used the same advertising imagery I was already using for the black and white series.