

WHAT IF THE NEW YORK ART WORLD DARLING decides to pull out of that institutional embrace? Concerned with the intersection of art and money, AND INTERROGATING THE NECESSITY TO RESPOND TO THE POLITICAL CLIMATE, the artist favors her studio-based vocation—one that escapes social and gallery-calendar obligations, FORCING A LIBERATING FORM OF SOLITUDE. Employing airbrush, digital softwares and industrial machinery (WITH A DETOUR THROUGH BLOCK-CHAIN RELIGION), her work pursues the visual/linguistic titillation of memes, while at the same time tapping into the NOSTALGIA OF EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AVANT-GARDE. And now that she's done breaking the MASCULINE SPELL OF PAINTING, she's wondering whether it's actually a dead art.

# AVERY

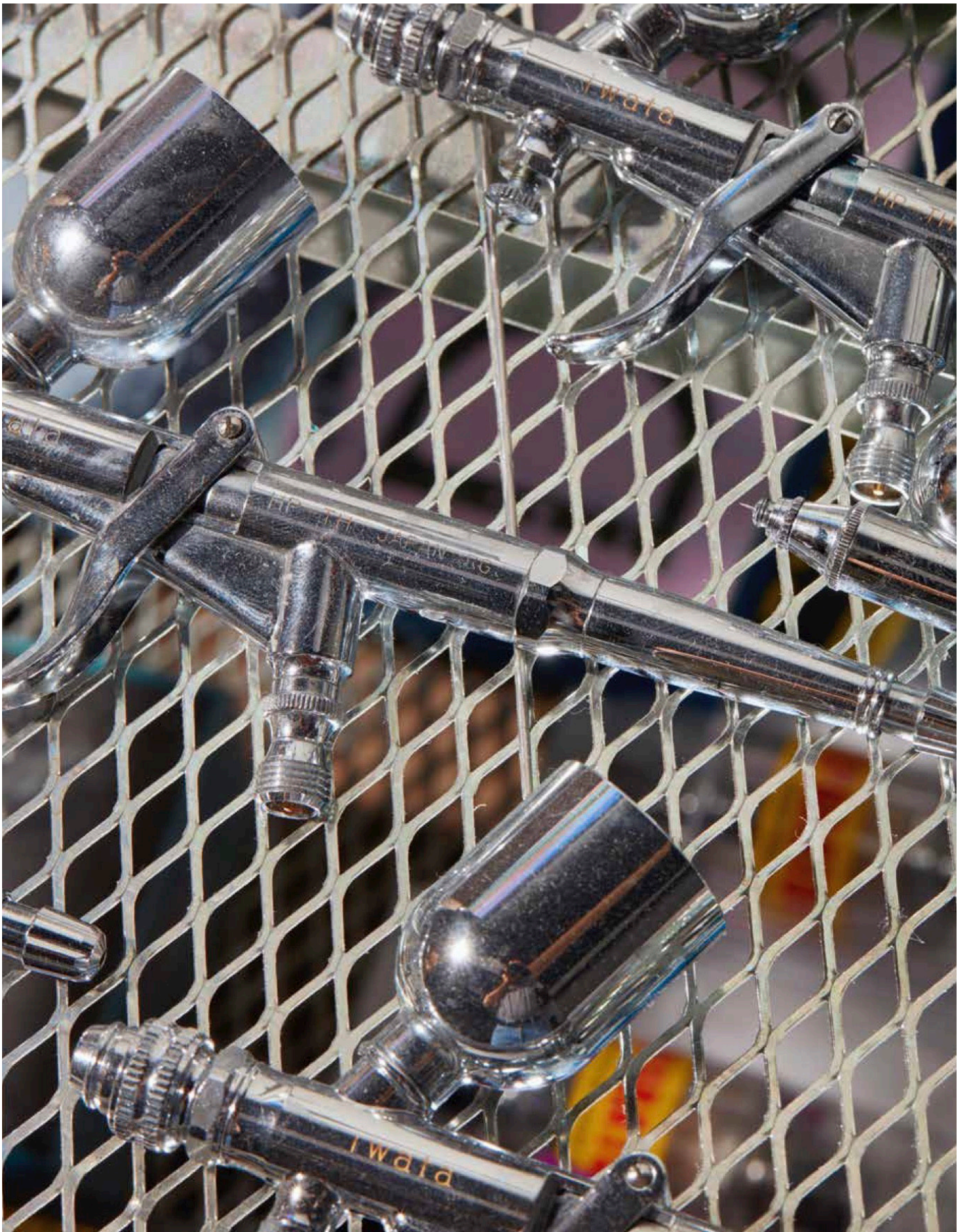


PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BRANDON GEETING

# SINGER

THE AMERICAN PAINTER











FILE: AVERY SINGER

words by ALEX BACON

It is predicted that, as soon as 2021, the viewership for esports (professional video game competitions) in the United States will have eclipsed that of every traditional professional sports league, except for the National Football League (NFL). It has already done so in other parts of the world, particularly Asia: in China, for example, the 2017 League of Legends World Championship drew a number of viewers (106 million) equivalent to the Super Bowl in the US. This points to the quality, appeal and ubiquity of today's computer rendered graphics, especially for young people: with esports, the majority of viewers are millennials (age 18-34), while data about Gen Z (age 13-21) suggests that they are already more receptive to esports than to its traditional variants.

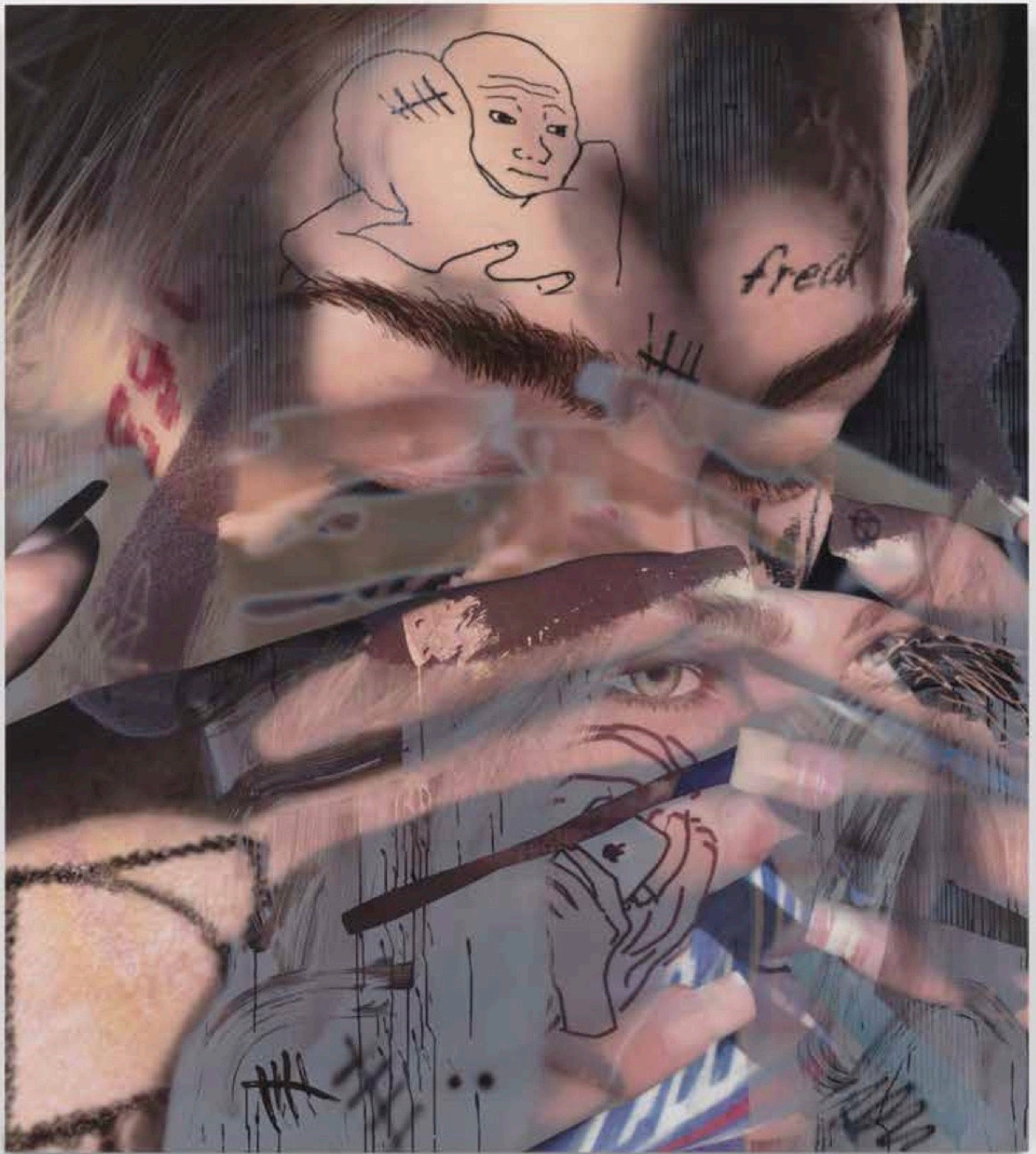
Artist Avery Singer's gambit is that in such a world, art must engage with these new representational modes that have become omnipresent. In order to incorporate this contemporary image paradigm into her work, Singer has invested in the Michelangelo ArtRobo, an industrial-grade painting machine with large-scale commercial applications, such as applying branding to airplanes. As in some video games, with careful handling, the Michelangelo is capable of rendering a computer-animated image with such precision and detail that it is nearly indistinguishable from a photograph. Singer plays up such ambiguity in works like *Untitled* (2019), which involves numerous layers of different imagery: not only a vaping female head, but also hand-applied airbrush marks, and even an overlay of swipes made with a rag that resemble gestural brushstrokes. Singer's way of working requires such a degree of care, with a large amount of time-consuming and expensive troubleshooting, that she's been

able to produce only a few works with this technology thus far, the most ambitious of which, like *Untitled*, are featured in her contribution to the 2019 Venice Biennale.

This latest development in Singer's work sheds light on her evolution over the past few years, especially as it relates to the use of technology as a means for producing a painting. It also emphasizes that the means by which the work is made are at least as important as its figurative content. Such content persists in the latest works, but its specificity gets ever more blurred: prior to working with the Michelangelo, Singer's imagery traded in the deliberately outmoded, nostalgia-tinged visual tropes of early computer graphics; that she has more recently sought to "update" this imagery shows that she is interested in shifting attention from a critique of nostalgic notions of identity, processed through a technologized filter, to tackle the complex confusion between reality and illusion that the contemporary digital world provokes. This is demonstrated by the ever-increasing popularity of esports, where competition between human protagonists takes place on a virtual stage.

Of course, these two components are not fully distinct. As with the technology itself, the very kind of image that Singer produces is predicated on the technology used to make it; while in Singer's case this image is representational, and is consequently recognizable as a cipher for something in the world, it is equally referential to the means by which it is made because it bears the signature forms of the program in which it was composed. These dictate what is possible for the artist, and in that sense can be understood to "co-author" the imagery alongside the artist. In

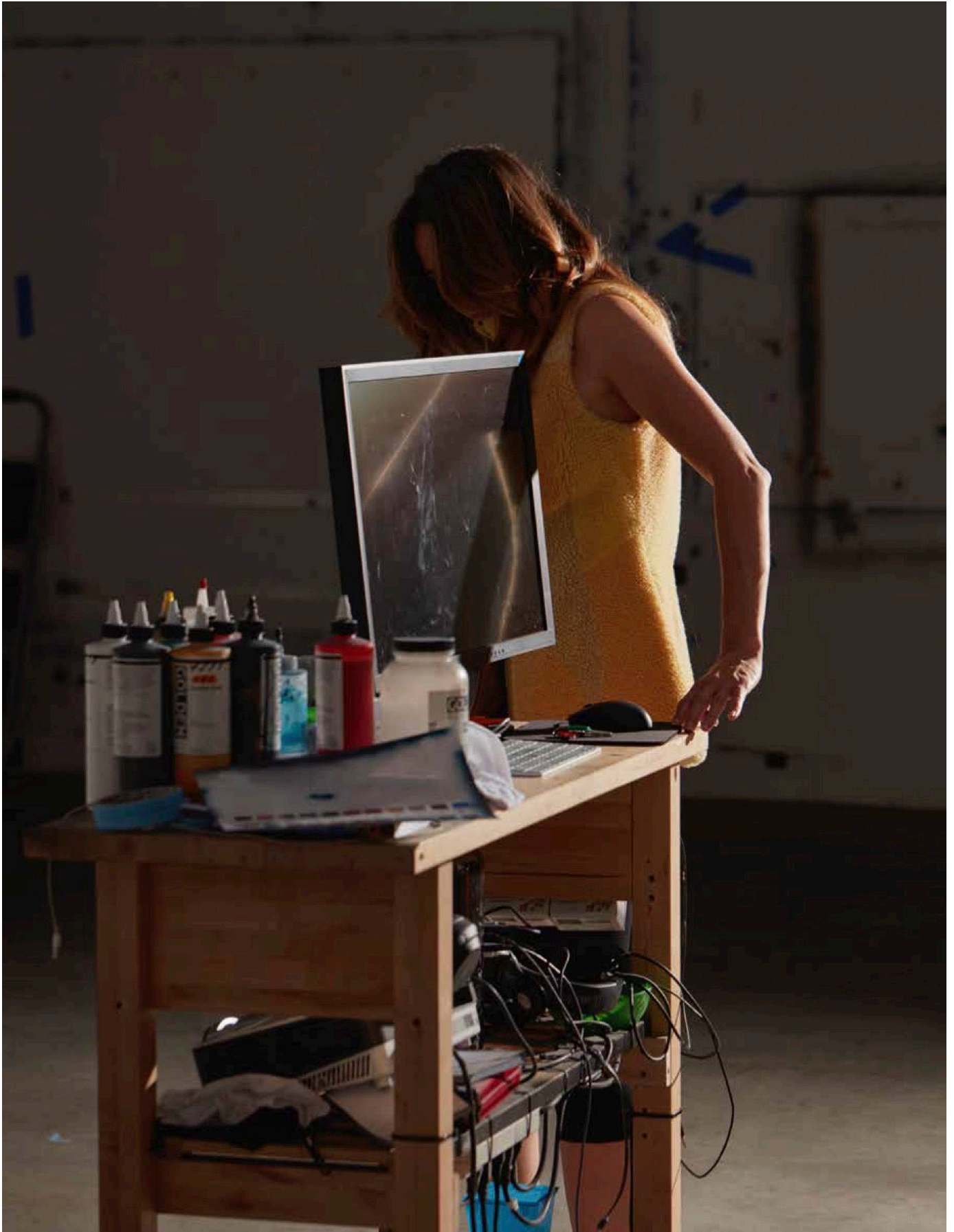












## FILE

this way, Singer's work contains a degree of what we might call both conceptualism and abstraction, though both are inadequate and even outmoded terms for what she does.

This is not unlike how the grid, that classic mode of abstraction, familiar from the 1960s work of artists like Agnes Martin and Sol LeWitt, can be understood as an abstract entity depicting only itself while also referencing a man-made system familiar from the world, thus suggesting a diverse range of worldly things, from the disposition of buildings in a city block to the arrangement of food in a supermarket display. The grid, which I mention pointedly because it has appeared as a motif in Singer's recent paintings, is thus at once a device that highlights the physicality and self-referentiality of the artwork in which it appears, and a cipher for an instantly familiar organizational system that the viewer will have encountered countless times in the real world. This is the very precondition that allows her or him to understand the grid as performing such analytical operations within the province of art. Otherwise, it would simply register as a mute pattern rather than a purposeful strategy.

Something similar could be said of Singer's computer-rendered figures, which are avatars devised by Singer but only made possible by Google SketchUp's existing pictorial vocabulary: the ways it has been programmed to describe the contours of a head, the texture of hair, and so on. She first encountered SketchUp in art school, where she saw the free program being used by architecture students as a shortcut to start work on the spaces they would later render in greater detail on more sophisticated software like Rhino. Thus began Singer's interest in computer-aided logics of representation, and specifically within a spatial context, given that this was the primary purpose of such programs, as opposed to the narrative constructions that drove other animation software.

Singer quickly became fascinated by the schematic nature of the figures generated by SketchUp. Meant to be stand-ins for people rather than fully developed realizations of them, they evoke an earlier quality of computer graphics, with a boxy construction that is more robot than human. By the 2010s, when Singer began this body of work, this language could not help but register as nostalgic and outmoded, in terms of how far short it fell from the mimetic possibilities of contemporary computer graphics. In this sense, Singer's technology was, from the start, non-specialized, deployed with a backwards-looking glance and tongue firmly in

cheek. This was further emphasized through the nostalgic subject matter of the works themselves, which, for example, depicted artists in studios populated by aesthetic tropes of the early-20th-century avant-garde. This rendered the scenes depicted as doubly inaccessible, both temporally through the setting and aesthetically through the crude anthropomorphism of the figures, which largely prevent any projection of specific human identity beyond broad strokes schematics. Given SketchUp's focus on spatial simulation, it is no surprise that it is the sense of space in which these figures are dispersed that feels more contemporary—which is to say "digital," meaning the kind of space we encounter onscreen: infinitely scalable and encompassing, while also feeling light and non-specific. This also happens to be a trope of much mainstream contemporary architecture, such as the ubiquitous office towers and luxury condominiums springing up across the industrialized world, which is produced with the aid of such technology. These structures translate the space of the screen into that of

living. There is thus a duality between the contemporaneity of the space in Singer's paintings and the non-contemporaneity of the figures that populate it, which serve as ancillary stand-ins meant to articulate the spaces that are the real focus. Singer elevates them from marginality to become somewhat developed subjects, as in the figure of the artist—whether in the guise of the musician, painter, or performer—that is found in numerous paintings.

This duality is further underscored in Singer's use of an airbrush. Airbrush is a technology that emerged in 1930s advertising as a means of more precisely executing painted representations. As such, the technique must be seen as a commercial application tied, as SketchUp is in more recent times, to the evolution of the increasing ubiquity of photographic imagery as the imagery sine qua non of modern life, which it might still be understood to be in its current digital guise. While painting as a fine art medium has been locked in a complicated and tense dance



This page: *The Studio Visit, 2012*. Next page: *Installation view at Glasgow International, 2014*





AVERY SINGER

## IMAGERY TRADING in the outmoded, NOSTALGIA-TINGED VISUAL TROPES of early computer graphics.

with photography since the introduction of the camera in the early 19th century, airbrush is an example of how, outside of the art world, technologies have developed to bring other modes of representation more in line with the qualities of the photograph.

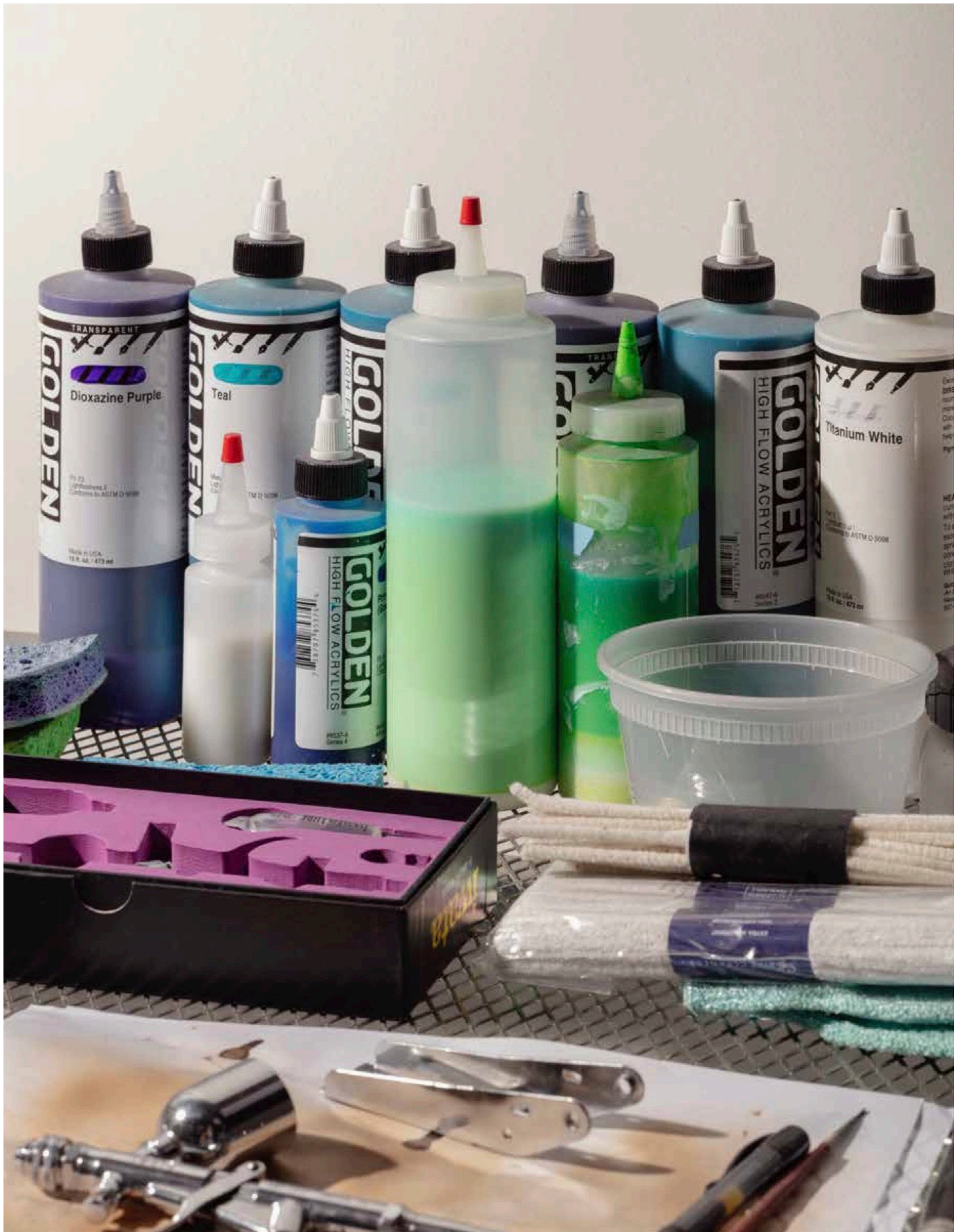
When it has appeared in the space of art, airbrush has often been used contrary to its commercial applications, as a device of abstraction, highlighting its de-authored, industrial context.

In the 1960s, for instance, there emerged a desire to find forms of representation that would be divorced from subjectivity, a desire from which abstract art had in part emerged. This motivated first the development of Pop Art and its fixation on commercial modes of making, like silkscreening and the Ben Day dot matrix taken from printing and, later in the decade, photorealism, which was pioneered by figures like Richard Estes, Chuck Close and Janet Fish. A frequent misconception of this work is that it is simply a slavish

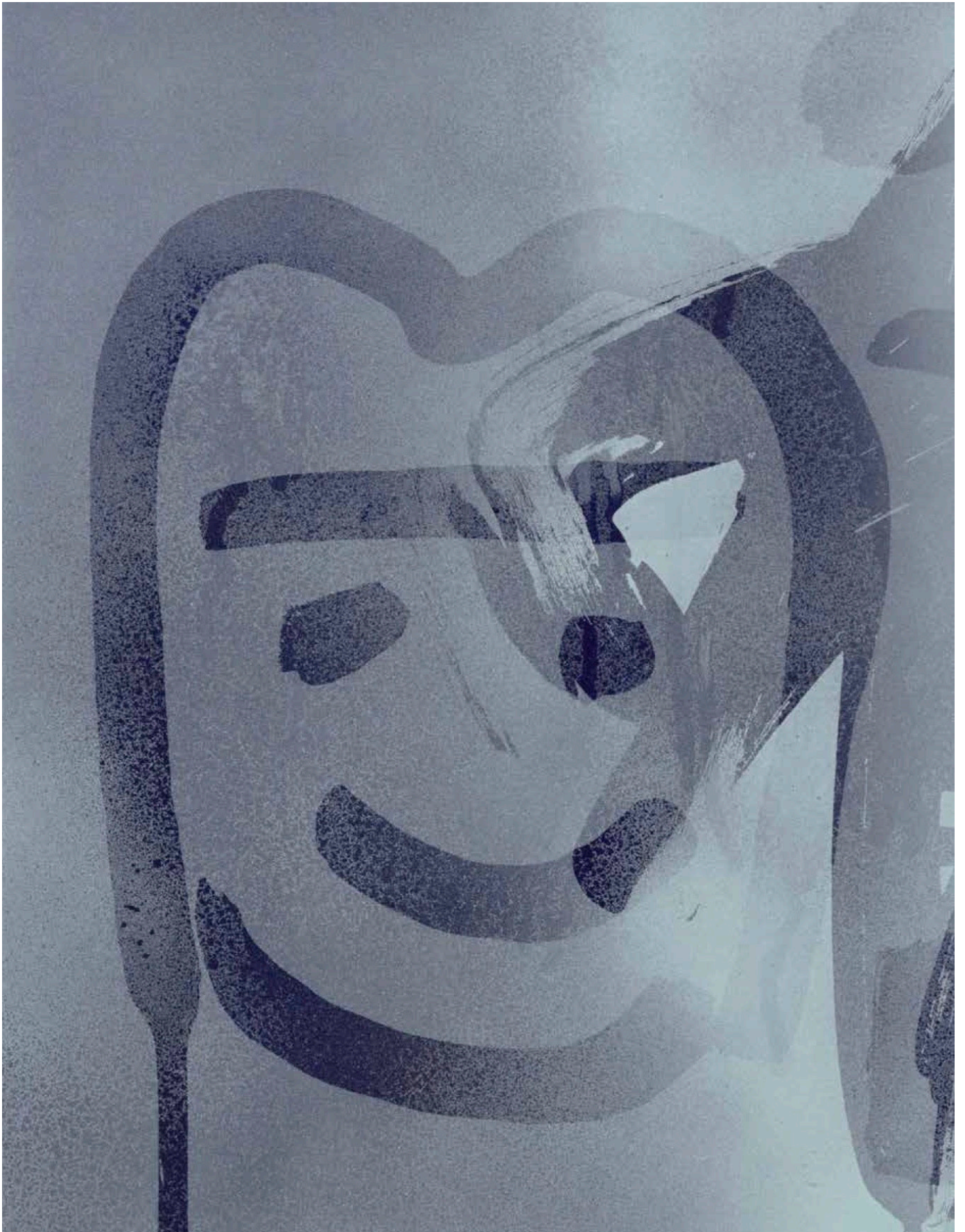
transposition of photography onto canvas. In truth, these artists devised techniques that, to speak generally, either hyper-emphasized the odd, denaturing aspects of the camera as an eye ultimately quite unlike our own, or else played off of photographic effects that turned out to be as much fictional constructions as dutiful observations. Both strategies emphasize the ways in which photography asks to be seen as a reliable document of "reality," whereas painting, with its long history of illusionism, is not presupposed to be such a record. Thus photorealism conjoins realism and fiction—an effect highly relevant to our present moment.

While Singer's particular brand of realism has been widely understood as a non-gendered gesture, many of the realms that she touches on—from computer graphics to architecture, commercial illustration to photorealism—are traditionally gendered male. This is because the technological, pseudo-scientific

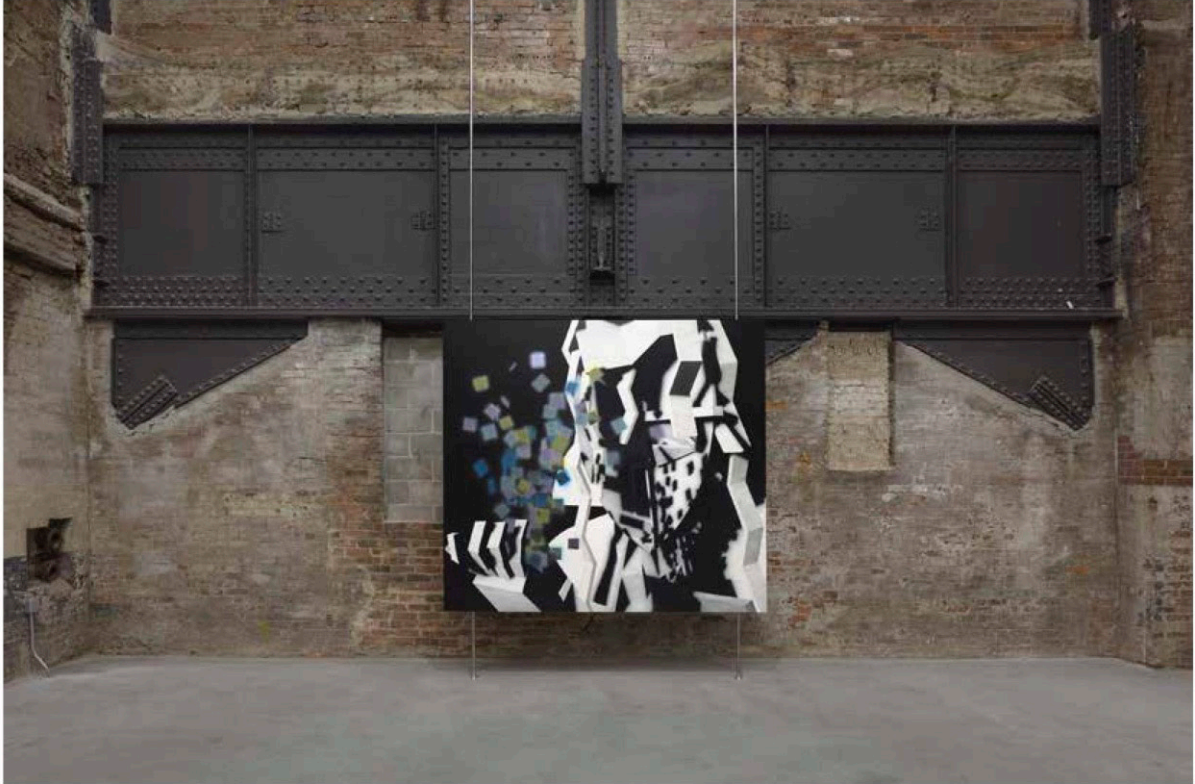












This page: Installation views at Gavin Brown's enterprise, 2018. Next page: *Sensory Deprivation Tank (empty)*, detail, 2018.

elements of control and precision implied in these realms are typically seen as a male province; even the participants in 1960s and '70s photorealism were mainly men, with the significant exceptions of artists like Janet Fish and Sylvia Plimack Mangold. As such, there is, to my mind, a critique embedded in Singer's work of the implied masculinism of technologized means of representation. Singer's use of airbrush plays between verisimilitude and the means by which it can be undercut—and along with it, the more masculinist valences of the technique. Her application varies from work to work, but close inspection often reveals not only clean, hard edges where tape was applied, but also less precise sprays of paint that belie passages done freehand. In Singer's work, it is often possible to see how it was made in such a way that would not be true of a "proper" commercial application of the technique. Such technique is learnable (Singer essentially taught herself with YouTube tutorials), and as such is more virtuosic, in the sense of specialized training, than that of the lone genius we associate with fine art and its traditional emphasis on individual style. Adherence to the photographic model goes against this, substituting the technological gaze of the camera lens for that of the human aesthetic eye.

The Michelangelo ArtRobo technology that Singer uses for some of her most recent work inverts this relationship: where SketchUp is primarily focused on the articulation of space, wherein the figure is incidental, the Michelangelo ArtRobo is focused on the figure, with the surrounding space being incidental. Further, the animation software that Singer uses to render the figures that the Michelangelo executes is as sophisticated as SketchUp was schematic. This eliminates the quality of nostalgia that was present in the earlier work and replaces it with an analysis of the confusion between simulation and reality particular to the present moment. The layers that Singer adds with airbrush and other means highlight artificiality while at the same time obscuring it, such that the viewer can have trouble knowing which elements in a given composition are animated and which were executed freehand: the beret in *Untitled*, for instance, is dutifully rendered, but fragmented to such a degree that it reads primarily as

texture, unless one knows the context. This is another distinction from the earlier work, in which space and figural and object relationships were more clearly defined.

Still, it makes sense that Singer continues to work with SketchUp alongside the Michelangelo ArtRobo, given the very different possibilities of each technology. Indeed, the artist is currently completing her most ambitious work yet, using SketchUp to generate a large-scale painting (over ten meters wide) that will be the second installment of the *Schultze Projects* series at the Ludwig Museum, Cologne, following the inaugural presentation by Wade Guyton. (Guyton is a significant artist for Singer, as his pioneering use of the Epson printer to produce paintings opened the door for the technologically inflected brand of painting Singer practices today, with each artist creating work directly self-referential of the technology used to make it.) Set to debut in October 2019, this new piece will summarize the figures that have appeared in Singer's work to date (the flute player, the artist, etc.), each of which will appear cropped and larger than life, one alongside the other and linked through an overall gridded overlay. This work succinctly demonstrates a central aspect of her work as a whole: the conjoining of grid and figure, not to mention the technologized rendering of both, with glowing grid enshrining the robotic visages. As in Singer's paintings, this evokes the ways in which screen space is inhabited by both figurative and abstract content, eliminating the need to discern between them, per traditional art historical discourse.

What was formerly a truism no longer holds up in everyday practice. The esoteric aesthetic world we once dubbed "abstraction" is now readily accessed by anyone through the graphic signs and telegraphic communication modes characteristic of digital devices. The way in which Singer plays with a distance from, as well as a proximity to, technology, via both the methods and the content of her work, is significant. She foregrounds the instability of the two entities, and in so doing, captures a central quality of representation today: that it is more an extension of reality than an approximation of it. **K**

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