Jon Rafman's liberal use of artificial intelligence is on full, dark display in an exhibition that features a kind of MTV warped by internet subcultures.

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By Travis Diehl April 17, 2025

Jon Rafman's show, "Proof of Concept," at the Sprüth Magers

New York Times

gallery in Los Angeles, resembles the stifling den of an especially nihilistic, screen-obsessed teenager. The floors and walls are draped with digital renderings of distorted humanoids and crusty furniture printed on cloth. Visitors can plop

down on a couch and watch music videos and short films, many

generated with artificial intelligence. This is Rafman's fictional "Main Stream Media Network" (MSM), a stream-of-consciousness MTV for the terminally online. Rafman, 43, a Canadian digital media artist who lives in Los Angeles, is known for plumbing the darker pits of the internet. In the meandering video "Kool-Aid Man in Second Life," 2008-11, he toured the vistas, malls and sex clubs of the pioneering metaverse game Second Life, with the bulbous red Kool-Aid mascot as his

avatar. His continuing series "Nine Eyes of Google Street View"

(begun in 2008) highlights odd, sad and poignant moments captured by Google's camera cars. At its best, Rafman's work

rescues sparks of human connection from tech's rising tide of absurdity. It's easy as it is to silo this kind of work as replicating — or mocking — the content that tech and social media pour onto our screens. But its strategies existed long before computers and smartphones. In the shadow of World War I, Surrealism and Dada used "automatic" methods like cutup poetry to surface the

uncomfortable truths thought to be lurking in the subconscious. Viewed generously, A.I. tools do something similar, distilling the collective subconscious expressed in the piles of text and images they're trained with.



evolution or devolution of our culture. Those questions are all the more serious given Rafman's recent

canceled his planned solo show.

artist's relationships were consensual."

past.

In 2020, Instagram posts attributed to three women — two anonymous and one named — accused him of sexual misconduct dating to the mid-2010s. They suggested that the artist, older and

relatively well known, had abused his position. (The posts have

since been deleted.) After The Montreal Gazette published the allegations, Rafman's show at a Montreal museum closed early, the unveiling of a public artwork was postponed, and, as The New York Times reported, the

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.,

said at the time that it would investigate the allegations. The gallery has stuck with him. "Proof of Concept" is Rafman's first major exhibition in North America since 2017. "It was essential for us to take this allegation seriously and consider it thoroughly from all sides," Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers, the gallery's owners, wrote in a recent

statement to The Times. Their conclusion, they said, "was that the

Sprüth Magers, Rafman's gallery in the United States and Europe,

Rafman himself, after posting a note on his website that said he had "never entered any interaction ill-intentioned" and apologized "for any emotional pain that I may have caused," filed a defamation lawsuit in 2021. In January 2024, as part of a settlement, The Montreal Gazette removed three articles about the artist.

While Rafman wasn't exhibiting in the United States over the last few years, his work only grew more provocative. In 2024, he made

a music video for the controversial rapper Kanye West.

Now, Rafman seems fascinated by the senseless, soulless A.I.generated content known as slop. He and his collaborators have concocted virtual bands and pop stars, including a BDSM club D.J.

called Stahlgeist and a bedroom-bound pop ingénue named Cloudy Heart, that seem calibrated to game the attention economy. Their synthetic-looking music videos, screened on the "Main Stream Media Network," mostly fall into self-parody, and convey the unfulfilling vertigo often induced by doomscrolling.

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Blooming

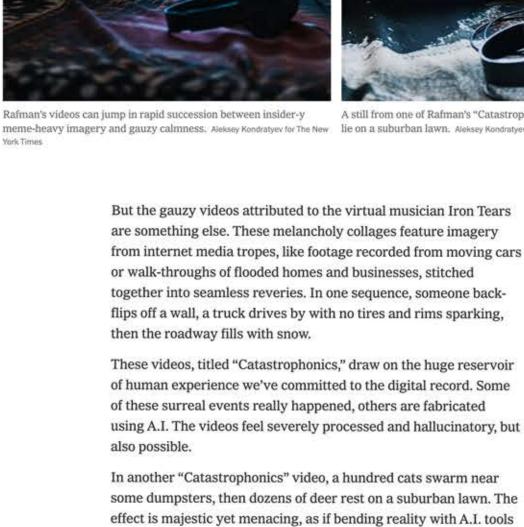
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Dinner Party

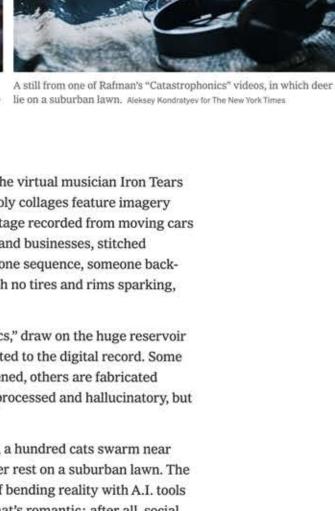
Asparagus Dresses Up for This Springy

It's Springtime on Polaris-9b, and the Exoflowers Are





watching.





media algorithms don't care what you watch, as long as you keep

Aleksey Kondratyev for The New York Times

seductions of technological advancement. Now, the cynical energy of online forums and video games that he explores has erupted into the mainstream. In fact, Rafman extends the quantity-over-quality logic of slop

Rafman's work from the 2010s often showed us the warp and

beyond the gallery. His Cloudy Heart character, a teenage pop star in the mold of Grimes, has an online presence. You can hear her A.I.-tinged singles, such as "Baby Needs to Vape" and "Hey Subscriber," on SoundCloud or Spotify. She posts selfies on Instagram and even has her own cryptocurrency, SCLOUDY. Like any other meme coin, it's part inside joke, part long-shot investment.

It's not clear to what extent Cloudy is art at all. Or if her brand is commercially viable: Today, \$CLOUDY's price is in the gutter. But that could always change.

Proof of Concept Through May 3, Sprüth Magers, 5900 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles; 323-634 0600,

spruethmagers.com. A version of this article appears in print on April 18, 2025, Section C, Page 8 of the New York edition with the headline: Deep in the Digital Reservoir of Human Experience. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

