

For This Artist, Doomscrolling Isn't a Bad Thing

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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"Proof of Concept," Jon Rafman's show in Los Angeles, mines internet subcultures and content generated through artificial intelligence. Here, gallery-goers watch one of several short films. Aleksey Kondratyev for The New York Times

By **Travis Diehl**
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Jon Rafman's show, "Proof of Concept," at the Sprüth Magers 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 flop 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.



Rafman's videos and short films feel severely processed and hallucinatory, but also possible. Aleksey Kondratyev for The New York Times

It's hard to know how sincerely Rafman approaches all of this — whether he thinks social media, A.I. and their sloppy ilk are the evolution or devolution of our culture.

Those questions are all the more serious given Rafman's recent 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., canceled his planned solo show.

Sprüth Magers, Rafman's gallery in the United States and Europe, 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 artist's relationships were consensual."

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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Rafman's videos can jump in rapid succession between insider-y meme-heavy imagery and gauzy calmness. Aleksey Kondratyev for The New York Times



A still from one of Rafman's "Catastrophonics" videos, in which deer lie on a suburban lawn. Aleksey Kondratyev for The New York Times

But the gauzy videos attributed to the virtual musician Iron Tears are something else. These melancholy collages feature imagery from internet media tropes, like footage recorded from moving cars or walk-throughs of flooded homes and businesses, stitched together into seamless reveries. In one sequence, someone backflips off a wall, a truck drives by with no tires and someone sparking, then the roadway fills with snow.

These videos, titled "Catastrophonics," draw on the huge reservoir of human experience we've committed to the digital record. Some of these surreal events really happened, others are fabricated using A.I. The videos feel severely processed and hallucinatory, but also possible.

In another "Catastrophonics" video, a hundred cats swarm near some dumpsters, then dozens of deer rest on a suburban lawn. The effect is majestic yet menacing, as if bending reality with A.I. tools has provoked nature's ire. Maybe that's romantic; after all, social media algorithms don't care what you watch, as long as you keep watching.



Aleksey Kondratyev for The New York Times

Rafman's work from the 2010s often showed us the warp and 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 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, [\\$CLOUDY](#). 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, [spruthmagers.com](#).

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