BORDERCROSSINGS

Geoffrey Pugen

September 2025   *Crossovers*   Earl Miller

Geoffrey Pugen's third solo exhibition since 2017, "Webtology: Prisms," does not explore the intersection of technology and nature as much of his previous work has, although the trippy abstract electronic imagery in his new pieces will be familiar to those who have followed his practice. This exhibition of 24 painterly collages and two video sculptures uses abstraction filtered through electronics to contemplate how integrated technology is into human perception and how cognizance of its ubiquity can liberate us from it.

"Webtology: Prisms" considers the speculative futurity of science fiction and its potential disconnect from actual technological development through digital collage paintings, mostly small (around 9 x 12 inches), which the artist calls "techno paintings." The included video sculptures incorporate LED screen technology into sculptural floor pieces that encourage viewers to contemplate how they experience technology.

Pugen's techno paintings intermix current technology with sci-fi book covers. He manipulates these covers, erasing sections and adding new imagery to build dense new compositions. He further alters the covers with textures and details, using 3D wireframe modelling forming a digital skeletal outline of images and AI-generated textures, rendering them to near-abstraction with only hints of them amid added figures, typography and architectural forms. The outer layer comprises prism film sheets from LCD screens, creating reflectivity, while the stained, faded, antiquated imagery it rests atop stresses time's passage.
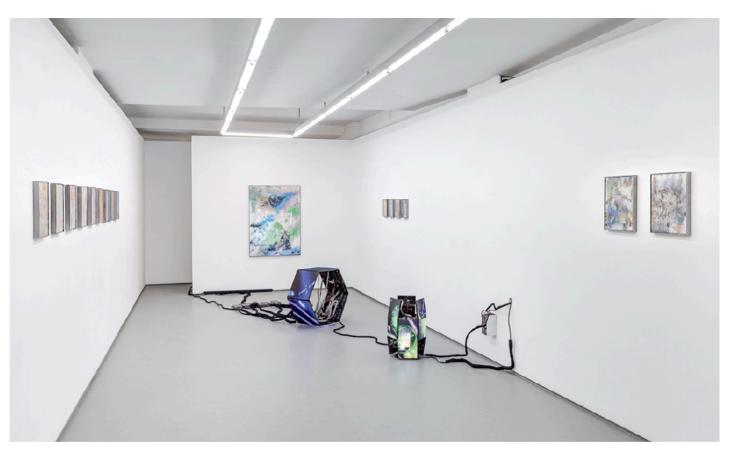
Geoffrey Pugen, *Cyberscape*, 2024, prismatic collage in custom frame, 3.43 × 23.81 centimetres. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy MKG127 Gallery, Toronto.

This intensive multi-layered process could be deemed "hauntology," a neologism coined by Derrida and noted in the exhibition statement. The term refers to past utopian visions that, when recontextualized

post-creation, stand as unachieved or unachievable. In Pugen's collaged paintings, reworked and largely obscured novel covers appear like archaeological ruins buried in contemporary technology, remaining as ghosts of faded possibilities.

This layering also stresses how so much of what we see, whether current events, family photos, Internet memes, or artworks, for that matter, is filtered through technology. For instance, *Airport Love 1*, 2024, comprises cool metallic colours referencing technology and 20th-century industry: aluminum along with wire and circuit board copper plus the telltale faded green of oxidization. Serialized images and forms, which in this piece comprise lines of turquoise-coloured letters that do not spell words and are placed sidewise, read like a cryptic programming code. In *Cyberscape*, 2024, geometric lines rendered with 3D modelling indicate a technological context, as do the aluminum silver and the faded blue palette, which combine to form what resembles a futuristic conglomeration of abstracted architectural structures.

The scale and intricate detail of these and other works permit close focus, drawing the viewer into Pugen's technically altered world in which present technology and anachronistic speculative futurism merge. Meanwhile, the shiny reflections on the prism film covers boomerang the work back to the viewer, opening space and dialogue and linking technological representation to the surrounding reel it originated from. Ironically, the filter of current technology makes the futurity of science fiction books irrelevant because they are unrealized histories, thus predictive failures.

Geoffrey Pugen, installation view, "Webtology: Prisms," 2025, MKG127, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy MKG127 Gallery, Toronto.

A striking difference between the paintings' and the video sculptures' use of technology is that technology and fictional representations of it are directly and indexically integrated into the paintings, while the technology powering the sculptures lies behind the work but is revealed. Prominent exposed cables leading to power bars offer an openness that deconstructs the technology behind the image, positing technological representation as illusory. The hexagonal floor sculpture *Dark Crystal*, 2025, and the pentagonal *Black Hole*, 2025, glow eerily blue, like television in dark rooms. Visually, the video sculptures do loosely reference crystals and black holes, respectively, a juxtaposition creating a contrast between potentiality, such as intrinsic healing powers, and disappearance and nothingness. The LCD panels installed on the sculptures' exteriors, lending them the appearance of satellites, screen variant abstract atmospheric imagery defined by bright light flashes and constant motion on primarily blue backgrounds. The videos are ever-changing but through a slow, mesmerizing metamorphosis of psychedelic universes. Since the video panels are on all sides, the sculptures are circumambulatory;

that is, the viewer must walk around them to fully view them, building the viewer's engagement and connection, like the paintings' reflective surfaces. Moreover, due to the sculptures' small scale and floor placement, viewers must look down, granting them empowerment by scale and further engaging them by making them as central to experiencing the work as the contained technology.

Accordingly, the works could be deemed anti-immersive. While their cosmic imagery may be familiar to audiences conditioned to immersive rooms, installations and exhibitions, the videos' small scale is a surprise and subtle break from convention, and, at least for this writer, a relief. Rather than experiencing subsumption into a large-scale installation where overstimulus stymies focus, this quieter approach permits—like the paintings' dense, busy surfaces—a scrutiny of detail. It also allows for self-directed navigating rather than being overpowered with immersion. The viewer, not the artwork, controls the experience.

Geoffrey Pugen's exhibition invites viewers to interact with and reflect on the technological zeitgeist, revising what science fiction predicted and, accordingly, what we have absorbed as our futures. Pugen's work is future speculative in reverse; by highlighting the gap between retro fiction and the real, it indicates what the future is not. Revealing layers of technology tells us how technology in general and AI specifically filter the way we live our lives, experience our subconscious and determine our future. Along with making evident technology's omnipresence, Pugen implies that attitude and approach can result in its benevolent application. His incorporation of AI is an astute alternative use of a rapidly commercializing medium, and his deflation of immersive spectacle allows viewers to determine how they experience technology, rather than the opposite.

"Webtology: Prisms" was exhibited at the MKG127, Toronto, from February 15, 2025, to March 15, 2025.

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