HIDDEN GEMS

Chris Dorland on the transformation of reality ⌐

The artist dives into why he's sharing a previously unreleased series for the first time.

NOV 17, 2023

Photo credit: Jason Schmidt

Chris Dorland is an artist who explores emerging technologies and traditional art, both through his creative practice and as Co-Founder and Director-at-Large of Magenta Plains, a thriving art gallery in Lower Manhattan. He recently launched his "digital skins," or digital images that are the visual scaffolding of his paintings, creating a unique blend of digital and physical materials. In this interview with Gemma contributor Willa Koerner, Chris discusses the transformation of reality, the challenges of releasing NFTs as an artist known for large-scale textured paintings, and the ever-evolving role of painting in the 21st Century.
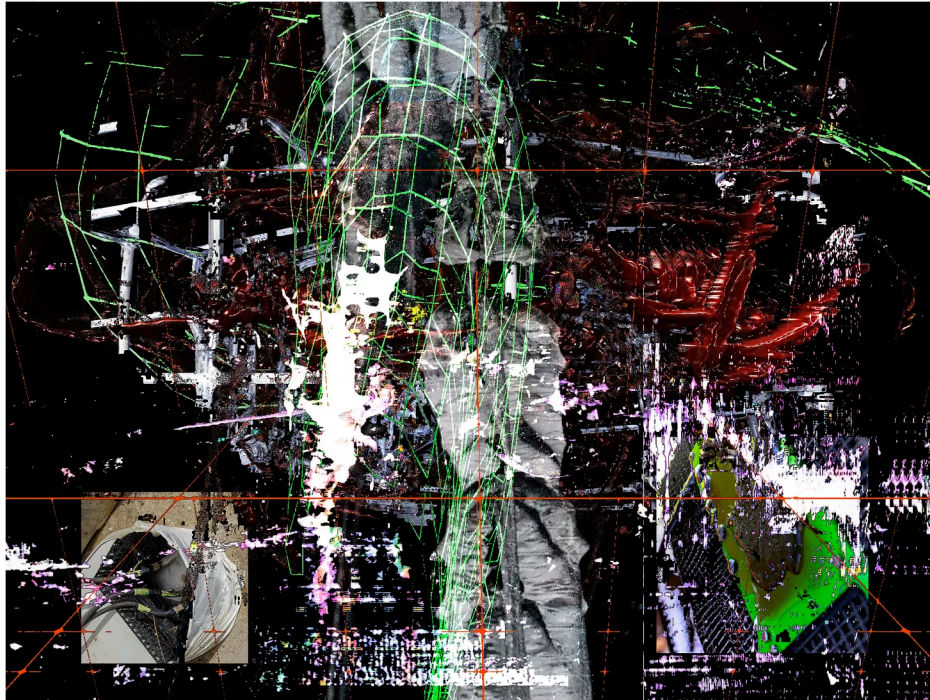
Willa Koerner: How would you describe your practice, and the way these latest works for Gemma fit into it?
Chris Dorland: I've always heavily identified as a painter, despite the fact that since the beginning my work has been interested in technology. In many ways one could describe my subject as being technology and the myths and ideologies of progress. Or, put another way, how our lives—and our means of experiencing the world—are increasingly mediated and affected by the omnipresent technological forces that surround us.

When thinking about how my studio toggles back and forth between digital and physical space, I've come to think of my work as operating on two distinct registers—one being software, and the other hardware. In my mind, a physical painting (or a screen, in the case of my screen-based video work) is a piece of hardware: it's a little rigid and it's set in time. But what animates that hardware is software–not unlike an operating system, for instance. And that software is flexible and mutable and ultimately capable of endless updates, unlike its exterior casing.

With my paintings, I refer to the surfaces of the work as "skins." These are digitally assembled files using an array of tools: scanners, cameras, imaging software, printers, and various other inputs and outputs until I arrive at an image I'm excited about. That's when my job as a painter

really starts and I need to figure out how to translate, or graft, that image onto the surface of a painting. And with that begins the rather slow and labor-based process of making a painting. For the Gemma drop, I'm releasing two JPEG files, or *phantom skins,* as I'm referring to them. These skins have yet to be turned into paintings. I tend to keep this stage of my work to myself, so this is a new experience for me. It feels like I'm sharing something private.

untitled (]]]]]]]]]\\) by Chris Dorland

Since you call these images "skins," do you feel that the digital images, once applied to a painting, become embodied?
Ever since I was a kid I've been obsessed with the metal alloy skin of the T-1000 in Terminator 2. I love this idea of an ever-changing, flexible, and smart skin that can adapt like a shape-shifting lizard. As a painter, I think of that in terms of the thin veil of paint that sits on top of the canvas. All painting is essentially made out of a skin of paint—it can be representational, it can be abstract, it can be goopy, it can be thin and stained, it can be anything really. Over the course of my painting career, I've gone through different ways of making these surfaces. My current work consists of really dense and thick fossilized surfaces that are built up and almost bone-like or archeological. And then there's this infra-thin digital membrane fused into it. They're very Cronenbergian in the sense of flesh and machine collapsing into one.
To go back to the T-1000 metaphor for a minute, what I've always liked about digital files is that they can also shift forms. You could have a JPEG that you turn into a PDF that you then email or otherwise duplicate, and it's still the same image but also fundamentally different. It functions a little bit like a virus in that it's this shape-shifting entity that can endlessly proliferate and grow inside of hardware, almost like a host body being taken over. Similarly, I like the idea that I can make something digital in my studio, and then it can go out into the world and attach itself to various things and perpetually exist.

Has it been challenging to translate your work into the NFT format, since your paintings are so large and textural? Do you feel like in NFT form, you're missing a hardware element?

NFTs allow for anything to be tokenized and traded. With this drop in particular, the only thing that made me a bit uncomfortable is the fact that I'm putting something out there that I've typically kept to myself as source material. I've been making digital work long before NFTs existed, but I've never released work that was a step in my process. Ultimately, the endpoint for my work is whatever the file grafts itself onto in the world that allows it to come alive. That could be a TV screen, it could be an iPhone, it could be a painting. The *phantom skins* are like ghosts without hardware—at least for the time being.

When I'm working in my studio developing images, I truly imagine them going out and looking for host bodies in the world. So in a way, a screen would become a place for the file to go live, but it wouldn't be limited to that one screen. It could slither off to find bigger and bigger screens, or go anywhere else that will host it. Or it could creep onto a painting. The host bodies are always kind of limited to the financial or technical limitations of their moment. But as the ability to show digital work on different types of screens becomes more broadly available, my work will gladly adapt to those perimeters.

Ultimately, I'm interested in these digital creations living in the world that we live in. So I get the most excited when my work finds real-world circumstances to latch onto and take root in. That's why I really can't shake the urge to make my paintings. I'm always going to feel attached to the physical effect of the hardware.

I'm curious to hear your thoughts on what it means to be a painter today. How are we redefining painting in this era of endlessly replicable images?

I've always been aware that being a painter is a weirdly old-fashioned vocation that can seem increasingly out of step with society. Ultimately the number of people that even have the luxury to go look at paintings is small, and painting doesn't really reward online viewing. Plus, to make a painting, you need space, you need time, you need money. It's slow. You can't mass-produce paintings, because quality typically goes down when you try to crank up production. What makes a painting special and poetic is that it is essentially human time recorded in the making. It's not something you can endlessly replicate. It's really un-digital in that way.

At times, all of the old fashionedness of painting has annoyed me but as we're fast accelerating and moving into this post-humanist age, I think the agency of making a painting is becoming increasingly special. As technology goes into hyperdrive, I love what I do more today than I ever have, because it feels more beautiful and precious and meaningful. I'm definitely curious and fascinated by where we're at in the world today, and the challenges that we're facing as a species as we're watching digital technologies start to move inside of us and deeper into our brains. Our understanding of reality is being transformed in real time. So overall, it's exciting to me that in the 21st Century, painting can still be interesting, and can still offer unique perspectives. Painting's resiliency is pretty nuts.

It's cool to think about how the origin of painting has always been about trying to find ways to represent reality, or to record and process the human experience. In many ways, that will never change, right?

True, unless the viewers start to change. I sometimes think about what I'm doing as painting for a future species, or as creating fossils to be found by some future entity to look at. It's fun to wonder what a non-human being might extrapolate from my work.

Interestingly, whenever I've put my paintings into any sort of AI software, it just cannot interpret the images that I make, and it can't make a satisfying extrapolation. I suppose that could soon change, and I'm sure if you fed the AI with enough of my own work, obviously that would probably solve the problem. But it's interesting that within the parameters of what these algorithms have been fed—and they're fed a lot of information—it cannot replicate what I do.

That fact has given me a certain amount of satisfaction that my job isn't going to be totally put out to pasture just yet. *[Laughs]*

I know you've begun using AI as a tool to generate some of your source material. What has it been like learning to integrate AI within your practice?
Anything that can generate more images, information, and new data is always exciting to me. But in the end, the software is so easy to use. It's like a toy. It honestly would be more fun if it was a little bit more challenging. And I don't love how corporate it all feels. But still, it's so powerful. I do think that this software is a huge step into our post-humanist future. I mean, the internet was a huge step forward because all of a sudden everybody had access to essentially the history of information. And now we're also getting access to a vast amount of hyper-smart computing power—it's really mind-boggling, and a bit overwhelming.
I've always been sort of dystopian-minded, and as the world feels increasingly fucked and fragile and strange, it's weirdly providing me with a tremendous amount of source material. So I definitely feel like I'm living in the right time, and it's amazing what tools are at my disposal given the nature of my work.

As someone whose practice consistently deals with the nature of reality, I have to ask: what have you learned or discovered about reality?
I mean, in some ways I feel like "reality" doesn't exist anymore. There's certainly no objective truth that can be agreed upon. With the amount of ideologically driven platforms and the number of voices that can be heard at any given moment, and the endless ways that information can be framed and reframed combined with all the reality-bending tools at our disposal… experiencing any kind of agreed-upon social "reality" clearly seems to have become a concept of the past. However, there's still the reality that you can wake up and look outside and see the sun, no matter where you are. So while reality as a collective cognitive experience might no longer exist, communicating one's personal experience of the world can be true to anyone experiencing them.
While the idea of "reality" has just shrunk down to something smaller and more intimate than it used to be, I still have faith in the act of attempting to communicate one's personal reality to others, and that it can still be a moving and worthwhile venture.