

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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KALEIDOSCOPE



Simon Denny: Mine

Words by
Penny Rafferty
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Currently on view at MONA, Australia, Simon Denny has a solo exhibition of works exploring themes of work and automation on the effects of technology on human labor.

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Simon Denny's working practice always leaves you feeling like your screen just inflated in the room. The content lies somewhere between the fictive aesthetics of ad men and a post-activist trope of the Nature 2.0 story. Defined by a signature hybrid style which is key to Denny's philosophical framings, the works explore ideas of technology, labor and play. When asked how he ended up here, Denny replies, "I started going to tech conferences, seeking out examples of how artists around me were starting to process what was happening, and came into contact with DIS, Timur Si-Qin, Jon Rafman, Katja Novitskova, Yngve Holen, Aleksandra Domanović and Aids3D, amongst others, which then led me to becoming really interested in a possible emergence of Web 3.0 and looking at blockchains, decentralized computing and cryptocurrencies." Denny explored the latter at length in his recent show at the Schinkel Pavillion in Berlin; when asked if this is related to his upcoming exhibition at Mona in Australia, he answers, "Yes and no. The Schinkel show was really a culmination of my research into artists working with blockchain. 'Mining' is a metaphor drawn on in the crypto space, as well as in data accumulation and analysis, and the climate impact of crypto is one of the central issues facing that industry. When preparing for the Mona exhibition, I looked into interesting crypto scenarios in Australia—like the story of a disused power plant that was completely reactivated just to power crypto miners—but ultimately, I felt the theme was too tangential; there were other, more compelling things to focus on for this exhibition. In the sense that automation, climate and technology are at the heart of the themes of these two shows, there *is* a connection—but it's not another show about blockchain. That focus of my work is elsewhere." He goes on to add: "One of the works in the exhibition, *Mine* (2019), looks into trying to imagine the body of the worker, extinction and automation. Through Kate Crawford's anatomyofan.ai research, I came across this incredible patent from Amazon for a cage where human workers who are working in an environment with automated machinery are mobile and protected. It's sort of a worker's cage. I was thinking about a body to occupy that cage and point to these themes: a body that would raise questions of who was a worker, who owns what, and what is work and compensation for whom in an automated environment. An easy metaphor for this is the canary-in-the-coal-mine—a worker who is not compensated and gives its life as a toxicity warning to humans."

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These at-times-odd musings and finite research make up “Mine,” which will be one of the largest exhibitions of Denny’s work to date. Vast and detailed, the show explores themes of work and automation on a planetary level, looking closely at the Australian mining industry as a specific case study of the effects of technology on human labor today. The exhibition not only connects mineral and resource mining with the more opaque world of data collection, but also sets these extractive practices against a backdrop of colonization, ethics and economics. When asked if this work affects him on a day-to-day basis, he says, “Yes. It’s led me to dive deeper into readings around climate change, the Capitalocene and conversations around deep adaptation and ways forward. I’ve come to think differently about resources, data and labor, which makes me think in very reticent ways when using platforms when taking planes. It’s opened my eyes to the urgency of other ways to think about technology, what forms of understanding tech could be different. If I was weary when trying to unpack the rhetoric of tech in 2012, now I’m much closer to terrified. Incentives need to change; stuff needs to shift on a systemic level. The world urgently needs leadership from people who are not stuck in industry paradigms that are accelerating mass extinction.”

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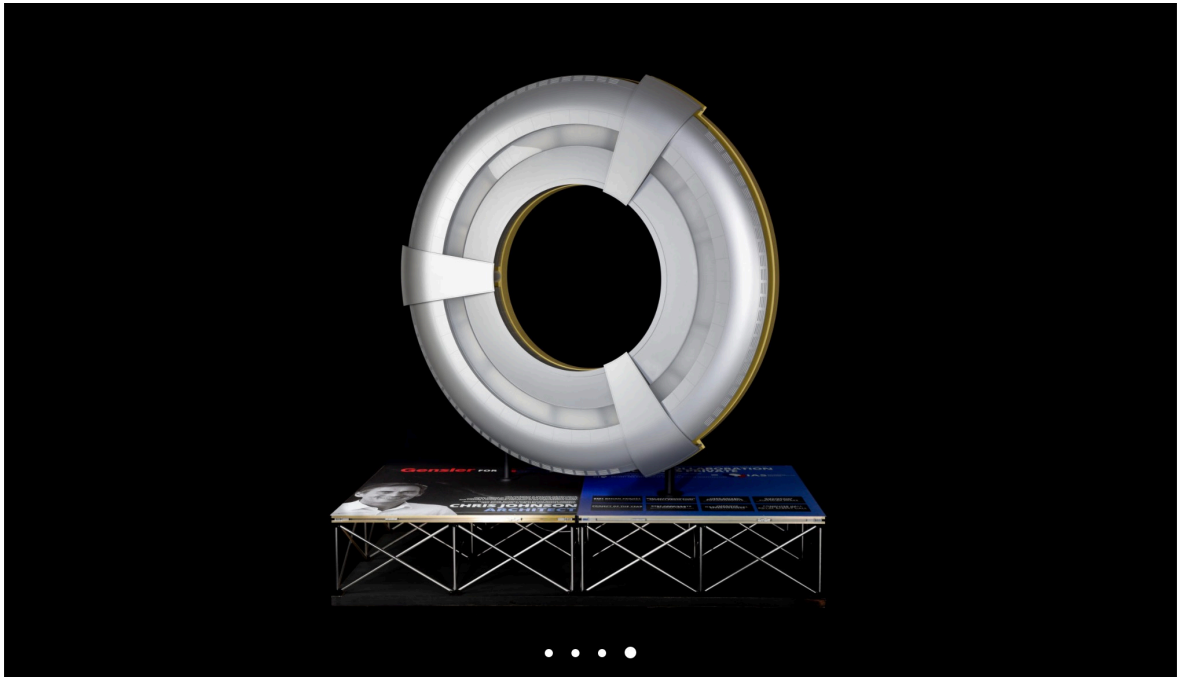


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Simon Denny (New Zealander, B. 1982, lives and works in Berlin).
Image courtesy of the artist.