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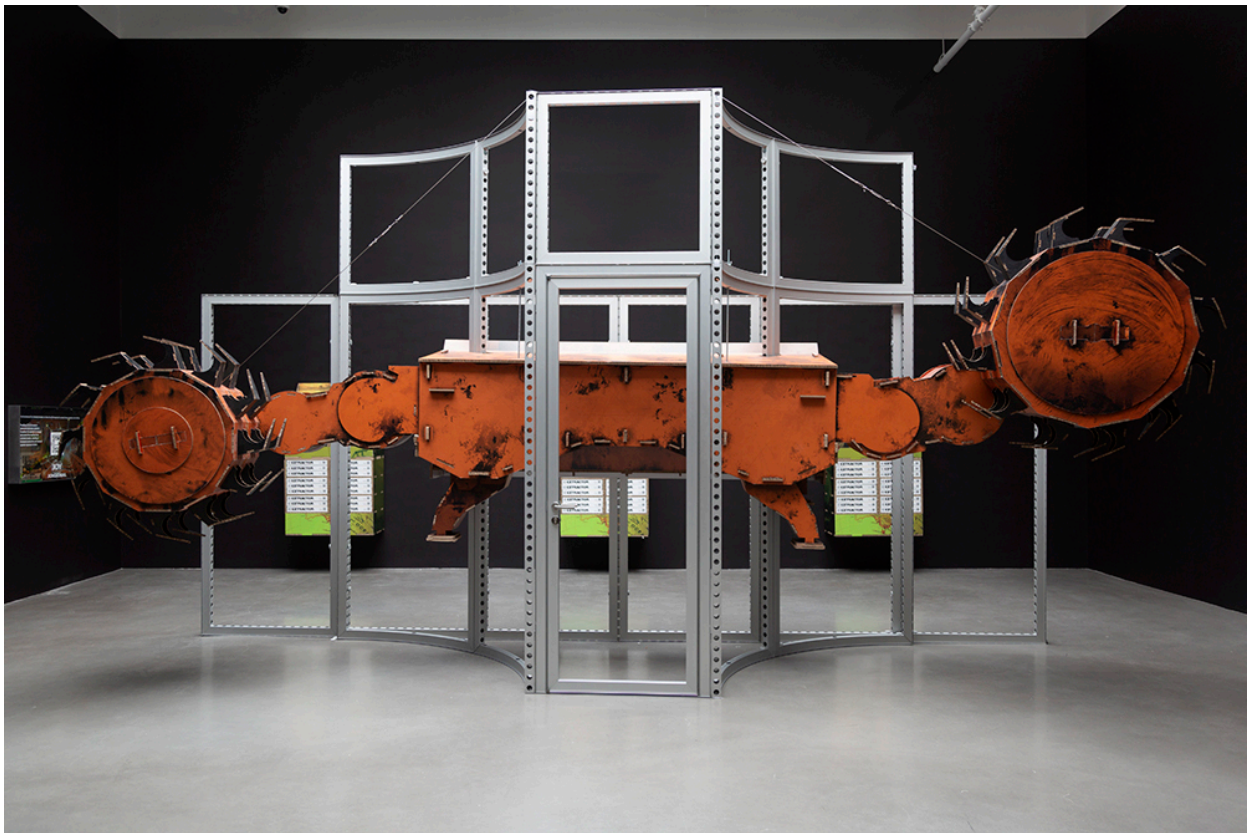
Art in America

Droitcour, Brian, "DOWN IN THE MINE," *Art in America*, March 18, 2021

DOWN IN THE MINE

By Brian Droitcour

March 18, 2021 3:20pm



View of Simon Denny's exhibition "Mine," 2021, at Petzel, New York.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PETZEL GALLERY

Is the monetization of digital art worth the energy expenditures required to verify a work's authenticity and ownership on the blockchain? Many artists say no. Others venture that it might be, and some of them have made concessions to prove that they care about climate change, like carbon offsets to mitigate whatever damage their crypto art might wreak. The naysayers remain unconvinced. "Carbon offsets are, and I cannot stress this enough, a fake idea," artist Everest Pipkin wrote in a fiery moral argument against NFTs. "Unlike direct lifestyle changes which at least are under your immediate control, carbon offsets are calculated as a hypothetical benefit in a hypothetical future that we may or may not live to see."

Simon Denny comes at this debate sideways with "NFT Mine Offsets," a new series of NFTs that marks his first entry into crypto art. The first drops tonight on the online marketplace SuperRare. In Denny's 23-second video, a digital rendering of the high-powered computing equipment used to mine cryptocurrency—a quartet of graphic cards hitched to a motherboard and housed in a custom frame—spins to the wordless drone of a choir. This looping rotation—a kind of perpetual motion that suggests depth and duration—is common in NFTs, perhaps because it gives heft to a file that appears flat on a screen, or just because it makes any 3D render look like a prize in a video game.

The project's website explains the "offset" component: Denny isn't actually using the rig to mine crypto. He's going to donate it to climateprediction.net, an initiative that uses powerful computers to model possible outcomes of climate change. It's a grimly funny gesture, a reminder that the tools used to measure the quickening pace of climate change are contributing to that acceleration just as much as the tools used to mine crypto. The internet used to document and debate all this is pretty bad, too; some estimate that you could boil a kettle with the energy it takes to do one Google search. As in much of Denny's work, signifiers seem to toggle between irony, earnestness, and ambivalence. References and associations—some immediately apparent, others accessible only through supplementary explanations—mirror each other and multiply. Metaphors start to feel like the site of reality and truth.

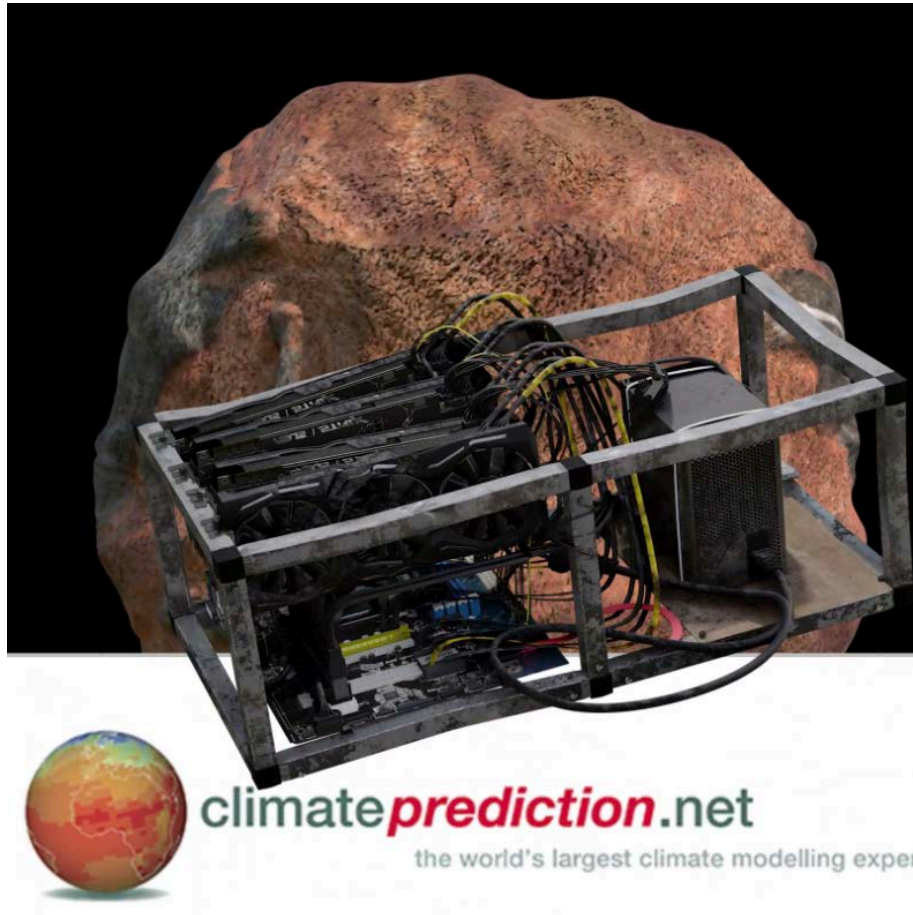
Tonight's SuperRare drop coincides with the opening of Denny's exhibition "Mine" at Petzel Gallery in New York, and he'll release the other NFTs in the series, each depicting a different mining rig, on a weekly basis over the course of the show's run. The body of work in "Mine" is a few years old. It debuted in Mona, a museum in Tasmania, in 2019. Pieces of the robotic

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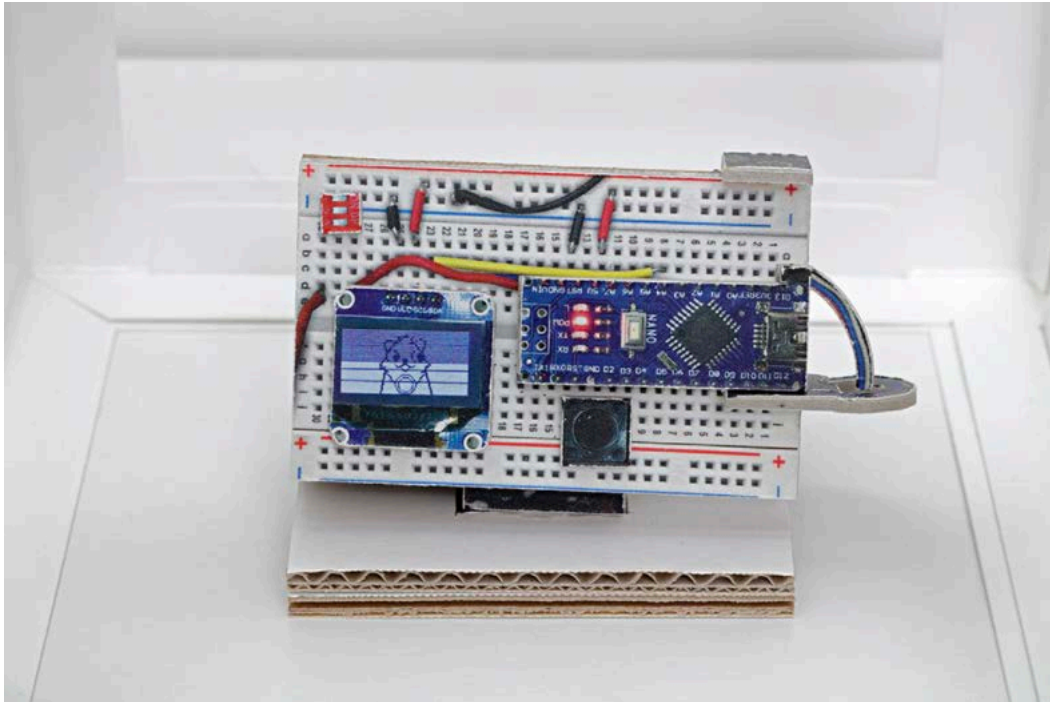


Still from Simon Denny's NFT Mine Offset: Ethereum
Kryptowährung Mining Rig 45 MH/s, 2021, video animation, 23
seconds.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

heavy machinery used in contemporary Australian industry—a coal mining shearer, a rock-breaking boomer, a docking station for drones—appear as massive cardboard sculptures, with facades drawn by a video game artist in a style that reinforces the uncanny cartoonishness of these works. Display cases mounted to the walls hold copies of a board game Denny published called *Extractor*, an update of the popular Australian board game *Squatter*. If *Monopoly* invites players to imagine themselves as real estate moguls, *Squatter* makes them sheep farmers, and in *Extractor*, they become big data tycoons, vying to poach data scientists while trying to avoid carbon taxes and other regulatory obstacles. The winner-take-all competition makes exploiting resources fun. The imagery of the contemporary mining industry give the data business a

rugged, macho feel. Denny's installations employ the conventions of what's been termed research-based practice—art that is premised on the in-depth analysis of data and events—but not the dry, documentary visual style associated with it. There's a trenchant critique of extractive business in this funhouse, but the seductive appeal of chasing and expanding capital is there, too.



Simon Denny: CryptoKitties Celestial Cyber Dimension Auction Display Replica, 2018, UV print on cardboard, plexiglas, computer screen displaying Gaspar Guile's Celestial Cyber Dimension (Kitty . 127.), 78 ¾ by 71 by 27 ½ inches.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE BUCHHOLZ. PHOTO HANS-GEORG GAUL

There's no connection between "Mine" and NFT Mine Offsets, besides the self-evident use of mining as a metaphor in big data and crypto alike. The choice to release the drop the same day as the opening might be written off as a PR stunt capitalizing on the hype around NFTs, if Denny hadn't been making art about the blockchain for years. His 2016 show at Petzel, "Blockchain Future States," deployed cardboard sculptures at convention-center scale to report on the companies vying to establish the future of finance. It included a video called *What Is*

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Blockchain? that explained the basics of the tech, but was stylized enough for those in the know to appreciate as art. In 2018, Denny curated “Proof of Work,” an exhibition of crypto-related art at the Schinkel Pavillon in Berlin. It included a valuable CryptoKitty, presented in an offline storage device, and leather spheres modeling tokens from Billy Rennekamp’s Clovers game, which replicates the process of crypto mining. This summer, the Kunstverein Hamburg is hosting a sequel to “Proof of Work” titled—what else?—“Proof of Stake.”

Denny is cautiously curious about NFTs. He hasn’t bought into the promise of their potential as a sustainable source of income for digital artists. And why should he, when he enjoys success on the old-fashioned art market? He’s earned himself a niche as the art world’s go-to expert on the new—not just blockchain but supply chains, surveillance capitalism, and other forces of finance and technology that are shaping the future world. He researches these topics and recombines imagery and information from them in the safe space of the white cube. Making an NFT is an uncharacteristic move for Denny; it means stepping out of the familiar confines of the art world and into the wilds of SuperRare. The wry reflexivity of the spinning mining rig in Denny’s NFT angles to hold onto some artistic autonomy, but it will still circulate on SuperRare among other rotating Blender baubles, cartoon Bitcoins, and Photoshop street art mock-ups. With NFT Mine Offsets Denny is no longer extracting material from the world of crypto. He’s immersed in it.