Art in America



# The Best PST Art-Science Shows Work Against Today's Obsession with "Innovation"

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Cara Romero: *Three Sisters*, 2022.
Courtesy Cara Romero (Chemehuevi)

*There are voices that travel from the past to the present to greet you.* Thus begins the "prediction" generated by the machine reading my coffee grounds. This unassuming contraption opens "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace" at REDCAT, an exhibition exploring the impact of artificial intelligence. Mashinka Firunts Hakopian, an Armenian artist, writer, and researcher based in Glendale, California, developed the coffee reader by training an AI model to learn tasseography, the matrilineal tradition of coffee ground reading that became popular across the Armenian diaspora following the 1915 genocide.

The coffee reader is a simple box wrapped in silver foil, reflecting the warm geometric patterns enveloping every surface in the surrounding "SWANA (Southwest Asian and North African) futurist kitchen," staged by Hakopian's collaborators Dahlia Elsayed and Andrew Demirjian. Back in May, Hakopian gave a talk at Eyebeam, where she is a fellow, about developing counternarratives to Western knowledge systems, including algorithmic prediction models. In a culture that directs our questions toward the search bar and away from our ancestors, AI divination offers a way to speak with and through voices from the past, prioritizing collaboration over the individuality that dominates our innovation-obsessed culture.

Mashinka Firunts Hakopian with Dahlia Elsayed and Andrew Demirjian: *ԲԱԺԱԿ ՆԱՅՈՂ (One Who Looks at the Cup)*, 2024.

Photo Yubo Dong

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On the wall opposite *ԲԱԺԱԿ ՆԱՅՈՂ (One Who Looks at the Cup*, 2024),Stephanie Dinkins also explores imbuing AI with ancestral knowledge. Her effort takes the form of an interactive humanoid avatar, *Not the Only One* (*N'TOO,* 2023–ongoing), a deep-learning AI trained on a dataset of oral histories with three generations of women from the artist's family. *N'TOO* is embodied only from the collarbone up, a light-skinned Black woman with a mane of bluish-silver curls, hovering slightly larger than life on a wall-mounted screen. I approach her like an oracle, and as her computer-generated eyes meet mine, they seem to scan my face. "Hello, what's your name?" I ask, speaking into the microphone below her. She blinks, furrows her brow, and sways back and forth in what looks like thought. "I said …" she begins in her synthesized voice, then mutters something I can't understand. Freezing under pressure, *N'TOO* encapsulates the failure of not-yet-there emerging technologies and the inevitable glitches in every new media show. At the same time, her awkward, anticipatory pauses humanize her. I can't help but think, *Machines make mistakes––they're just like us.*

"All Watched Over" is a standout among the 60-plus exhibitions comprising the Getty's **PST (https://www.artnews.com/t/pst/)** ART quinquennial initiative, this year themed Art & Science Collide. REDCAT offers a welcome contrast to the sinister, disembodied specter of AI in popular media, giving us a glimpse into a near future that is, in Hakopian's words, both embodied and emplaced. In a sea of cynical, dystopian discourse, this work is hopeful—optimistic, even.

**IN MAINSTREAM WESTERN DISCOURSE,** new technologies have long been associated with future-gazing. More than 20 years ago, scholar Alondra Nelson critiqued the very notion of linear technological progress for envisioning a near future that is "placeless, raceless, [and] bodiless." Schools of thought like Afrofuturism instead offer time as something radically anachronistic, or as author Ishmael Reed put it, *synchronistic*, "putting disparate elements into the same time, making them run in the same time, together." Past, present, and future are all interconnected; there is no hierarchy among them.

"Draw[ing] on worlds past to imagine worlds to come." The wall text explains this is what unifies the more than 50 works in "Future Imaginaries: Indigenous Art, Fashion, Technology" at the Autry Museum of the American West. The show explores how contemporary artists and designers engage with Indigenous Futurisms, presenting an expansive understanding of technology––not just the cutting-edge, hi-tech stuff, but also those "working systems critical to everyday life in Indigenous cultures, from medicinal plants and sustainable agriculture to artistic media and culturally appropriate means of interacting with the living and nonliving entities that form our environment."

Cara Romero: *Three Sisters*, 2022.

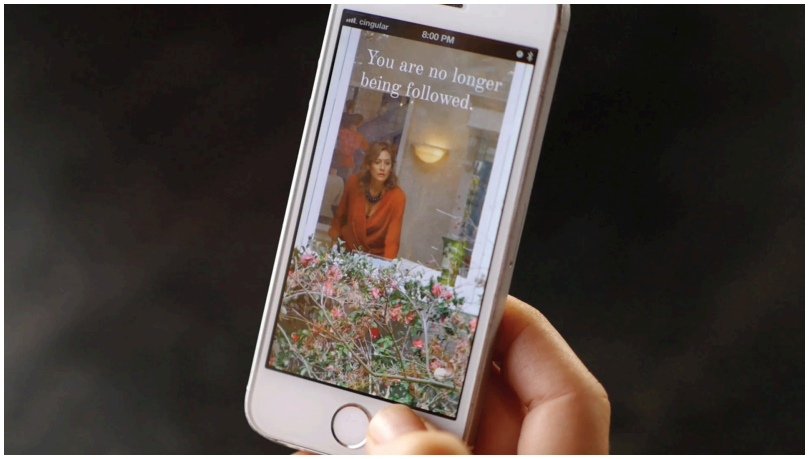
Courtesy Cara Romero (Chemehuevi)

Occupying multiple temporalities at once, the show's futurist works invite us to time travel with them. Stylized science-fiction photographs by Cara Romero, a Chemehuevi artist, show an astronaut floating in space with ears of corn, as well as the three sisters—corn, squash, and beans—reimagined as blue-skinned cyborgs tattooed with ancestral designs. Kanien'kehà:ka [Mohawk] artist Skawennati's *Words Before All Else* (2022) video is made with machinima. A portmanteau of *machine* and *cinema,* machinima refers to films made by recording real-time 3D environments, in this case, the game *Second Life*. Skawennati introduces us to another avatar, xox, fashioned after the artist herself; xox stands before a spinning globe, sporting space buns that sprout blue and pink lights in the shape of those fiber optic light-sabers that street vendors sell on hot summer nights. In the Kanien'kéha (Mohawk) language, she recites a "verse from the *Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen*, also known as the 'Thanksgiving Address,' which is traditionally spoken at the opening and closing of all Haudenosaunee gatherings to set a positive tone and to remind everyone of their place in the universe." Flashing an endearing machinic smile, xox

repeats the verse in English, then French. She then beckons a diverse group of avatars to take a selfie with her, a universal gesture of friendship.

**OTHER EXHIBITIONS MAKE** the feeling of time travel even more tangible by placing obsolete technologies in the present. "Digital Capture: Southern California and the Pixel-Based Image World" at UCR Arts in Riverside, accompanied by a virtual exhibition in collaboration with EPOCH Gallery, focuses on artists as "early adopters" of emerging technologies, most of them developed in Silicon Valley. It features multiple interactive pieces, including a refurbished version of *Huaca* (1987)by Bolivian-born artist Lucia Grossberger Morales. A keyboard-controlled kaleidoscope housed within a brightly painted, shrine-like structure (*huaca* is a Quechua term that refers to sacred objects, places, or deities), this installation invites the viewer to sit down in quiet contemplation and manipulate the geometric patterns, watching them swirl through a triangular window.

Where the original structure was painted in stenciled designs based on Bolivian weaving patterns, with colors matching those in the Apple II computer running the program, Morales adorns this updated version with AI-generated, imaginary indigenous South American figures. Her computer sculpture offers a Southern California counterpart to Nam June Paik's iconic *Portable God* (1989), made around the same time and exhibited upstairs. These objects recall a transitional time for media technologies not unlike our own; while Morales's altar requires the visitor's touch to activate it, Paik's invites more passive interaction, foreshadowing the moment when the TV was, as the curators aptly put it, "about to become just another screen."



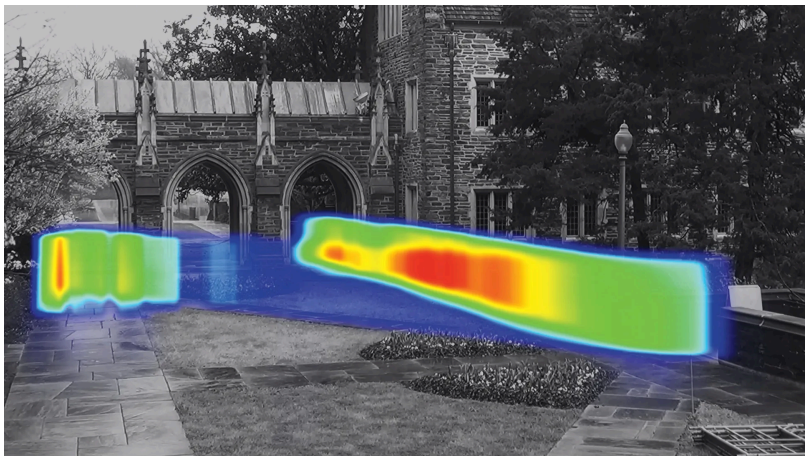

Lauren Lee McCarthy: *Follower*, 2018.

Indeed, screens of all shapes, sizes, and persuasions dominate "Digital Capture." Another interactive piece, not exactly an artwork but a working display of twin Visitels (Visual Telephone Displays) developed in Santa Clara in the late 1980s, invites visitors to take a selfie on one display and, with the push of a button, transmit it to the other. The scan lines on the Visitel screen resisted capture by my phone camera. My likeness lingered only until the next person replaced it with their own. It's rare to experience true ephemerality these days; how few images have no digital trace?

**IN "A NEW INSTRUMENT OF VISION,"** written nearly a century ago, artist-theorist László Moholy-Nagy observed that new technologies enable new ways of seeing the world. For many artists in PST ART, technological advances also enable new ways of *being* seen––or rather, being watched. Works from the 2010s especially (planning for the exhibition began five years ago) explore the visual culture of

surveillance, which feels both historic and topical. One especially chilling example from "Digital Capture" isLauren Lee McCarthy's *Follower* (2016), a series of JPGs glowing across six iPhone 7s, documenting the artist's tongue-in-cheek "service" providing users with a "real-life follower" for one day via an iOS app.

"Invisibility: Powers & Perils"at OXY ARTS in Eagle Rock opens with a striking image by artist/researcher Adam Harvey: a black-and-white photo of the Duke University campus, deserted except for a sweeping gradient of highly saturated RGB color where we would ordinarily see the movement of the student body. Harvey made this image from a dataset of surveillance video footage compiled by Duke scientists in 2014, the most widely used source for developing multi-target multi-camera (MTMC) surveillance algorithms––that is, until it was revoked after the artist published an article about the university, which used its students' likenesses without their permission.



Adam Harvey: *DukeMTMC Datageist*, 2019.

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Harvey's work echoes a project by Zach Blas, *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2012–14), on view in LACMA's "Digital Witness: Revolutions in Design, Photography, and Film" through July 13. The show was not officially open as of this writing, but in September and October, the museum displayed "samples" in an "introductory" gallery. Tucked in a quiet corner, Blas is so far one of the only artists on view who seems to take a critical approach to these so-called revolutions in this Adobe-sponsored show. Using biometric data from scientific studies that aimed to quantify "gaydar" by employing rapid facial recognition to determine sexual orientation, Blas creates bloblike masks for public interventions and performances, protecting whoever wears it from the pernicious gaze of computer vision.

Compared to "Digital Capture" at UCR, "Digital Witness" (this preview version, at least) is lackluster, though not lacking *in* luster; the show is sleek like the digital aesthetics it aims to trace. It includes heavy-hitters John Whitney and Cory Arcangel as well as local heroes like Lee Mullican, the late painter whose computer works from 1987 were recently released on the blockchain; and Rebecca Allen, who created all the visual material for Kraftwerk's 1986 album *Electric Café* using state-of-the-art facial animation software. While there's risk involved in interactive pieces, especially at a museum with as much traffic as LACMA, the lack of buttons to push (or at least look at) make this exhibition feel cold, only reinforcing the age-old bias against computers in the arts, which I thought had been squashed by LACMA's show "Coded" last year.

**INTERACTVITY AND VINTAGE HARDWARE** were hot topics at an unofficial PST panel discussion that took place September 19 at Santa Monica College, titled "Hacking the Timeline: Integrating Digital

Art into Mainstream Art History." There, Getty Research Institute associate curator Pietro Rigolo advocated for props in the museum, such as the analog Xerox machine he sourced for Barbara T. Smith's retrospective last year. This technology that Smith knew and loved, and that radically changed her practice, anchored the exhibition, and created an unexpected photo op for visitors, enabling them to relate to Smith's work through more than just her images. Through the lense of art and technology, Rigolo suggests, we can view art history as a network of relationships and collaborations, rather than a succession of individual "geniuses." The white, patriarchal grip on the history of science and technology––the target of Huntrezz Janos's mockumentary *Azon Machine* (2016) in "Digital Capture"––has dominated the history of art and technology as well. Yet across its 60-plus shows, *PST ART: Art & Science Collide* demonstrates that we've come a long way from the mid-20th century, when technologists who collaborated on artworks were uncredited, if their work was exhibited at all.

Shows like "Crossing Over: Art and Science at Caltech, 1920–2020" celebrate those decades of collaboration between artists and scientists that gave rise to interesting, even paradigm-altering images, such as the hand-colored Mars probe images that were the first pictures of the red planet to be broadcast on television. Collaboration is an easy word to throw around, but in the context of art and science, there is no better way to describe the labors of love that make these artworks and exhibitions possible. Michael J. Masucci, the founding member and director of video art collective EZTV who organized and moderated "Hacking the Timeline," bellowed a poignant question into the microphone: "Do art and science really *collide?*"

Collision implies violence. It doesn't capture the nuances of collaboration, which is generative even if it's not successful. Art and science are both continuums of creativity. They both aim to answer the same existential questions. They have been pitted against each other again and again, and to what end? "Art and science don't *collide*," Masucci says, "they make love."

Masucci's studio is full of obsolete equipment that he rescued from dumpsters, many belonging to the late members of EZTV who lost their lives to AIDS. Most of these devices don't work anymore, but that's not why he keeps them. "I keep them because I want people to remember where we came from." In our high-speed culture of constant innovation and disruption, it's so easy to update, refresh, and forget. The coexistence of historic and contemporary artworks, vintage and brand-new hardware and software, ancestral voices and speech synthesizers—this is how we time travel, how we occupy multiple temporalities at once. Bringing art and technology together—not by collision, but with a softer touch—lets us remember where we came from, so that we might use that knowledge to inform how we act now and what we plan to do next.