

**Joseph Nechvatal: *Information Noise Saturation*****November 6–December 20, 2025****Level One**

Magenta Plains is pleased to present Joseph Nechvatal: *Information Noise Saturation*, a historical exhibition by inter-media pioneer focused on computer-robotic assisted acrylic paintings and graphite drawings on paper made from 1982–1990. This crucial period in the artist's practice marks a shift in his work from an earlier, minimal aesthetic toward a complexification<sup>1</sup> brought on by the advent of the personal computer and the internet. A concern with information noise and media overload form the backbone of Nechvatal's thematic direction in these works, as he attempts to grapple with some of the defining postmodern challenges of the last forty years: nuclear proliferation, the spread of disinformation, and the rapid integration of large language models into our society.

Joseph Nechvatal arrived in New York in 1975, pursuing graduate coursework in philosophical aesthetics at Columbia University and working part-time as an archivist at the Dia Art Foundation. He quickly became embedded in the vibrant scene of the East Village, participating in the artist cooperative Colab and aiding in the founding of radical artist-cum-activist space ABC No Rio in 1980. He frequently exhibited at the Nature Morte Gallery, which was known for exhibiting deconstructionist conceptual photography, sculpture, and paintings by artists such as Gretchen Bender, Jennifer Bolande, Sherrie Levine, Ken Lum, Allan McCollum, Peter Nagy, Cady Noland, and Steven Parrino. Further exhibitions took place at Brooke Alexander Gallery, where a technician introduced Nechvatal to the computer-assisted technology he would later use to make his conceptual paintings. Throughout the decade, Nechvatal's practice straddled both neo-expressionism, best represented by painters such as Julian Schnabel or David Salle, and post-modern appropriation as practiced by Cindy Sherman or Sherrie Levine, artists who enacted reproduction of imagery through a critical lens.<sup>2</sup> However, Nechvatal's consistent political praxis and commitment to using drawing and painting as tools to communicate ideas beyond an aesthetic concern sets him apart from many of his contemporaries.

Nechvatal's drawing practice from this period forms the basis for his conceptual paintings and share a common aesthetic: each work is a diptych of dense graphite edge to edge. Nechvatal created these works by laying paper on a translucent table and lighting from underneath, allowing him to achieve a layered surface of marks while working at them intensively with a graphite block until the surface of the work achieved an almost uniform smoothness. While at first glance many of these images appear to be purely abstract, imagery appears with closer inspection; in *No Future* (1983), a police officer looks on haughtily while a civilian cowers beneath a fighter jet. The greyscale shading of these works focuses the viewers' attention on line and mark, emphasizes the immersive nature of these images, and stands in contrast to the pop color palette of many of his contemporaries.

---

<sup>1</sup> Complexification is a process in mathematics and computing in which systems increase in complexity through spatial differentiation and the selection of fit linkages between components, resulting in a hierarchy of nested supersystems or metasystems. This process is driven by the need to enhance the variety of actions and to integrate these actions into higher-order complexes to effectively respond to diverse environmental challenges.

<sup>2</sup> Frank, Patrick. 2024. *Art of the 1980s*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG. pgs. 7–8.

In 1986, Nechvatal began using image enlargement technology (first developed as a method for producing billboards) to digitize and magnify his drawings into acrylic paintings that are layered in a web-like, labyrinthian manner. Invented in Japan and brought to the United States by the California-based company Computer Imaging Services, this process involved airbrush-painting images directly onto canvas from photochemical transparencies. This method expanded the bounds of his information-overload aesthetic, both in terms of scale and ambition. Works such as *Profusely Informed Personage* (1986) incorporate a dimensional figure wrapped entirely in xeroxes of Nechvatal's drawings and anti-war protest posters in an immersive visualscape of chaotic marks. This mediated technology offloaded the primacy of the artist's hand, foregrounding the idea and its genesis. In this sense, Nechvatal is aligned with Sol Lewitt's view that a painting can be a repeatable, temporally unbound object, as opposed to a record of a creative encounter with material. In Lewitt's words, "the idea becomes a machine which makes the art."

With these computer-assisted paintings and graphite drawings, Nechvatal sought to evoke the ideological manipulation at the center of mass media "infotainment" during one of the most dangerous moments of the Cold War, as the Reagan administration ratcheted up nuclear tensions with the Soviet Union. Nechvatal's "aesthetic of subtle excess," in his own words, functions in opposition to the pop imagery and media designed to obfuscate the bellicose rhetoric of this period. These works were borne from Nechvatal's concern with nuclear apocalypse, but in today's world, they take on a new light. In our contemporary society of ideological excess and amidst an unmitigated hurtle toward "artificial intelligence," an ill-understood technology with the potential for vast economic and ecological disruption, Nechvatal's work stands as a prescient warning.

Joseph Nechvatal (b. 1951, Chicago, IL) is an American post-conceptual artist whose work explores the interfaces between the technological and the biological, the digital and the corporeal. Nechvatal lived in Tribeca while pursuing a philosophy degree at Columbia University and subsequently moved to the Lower East Side. In 1979 he became associated with the artist group Colab and helped establish the non-profit group ABC No Rio in New York City. In 1983 he co-founded the avant-garde electronic art music audio project Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine. In 1984, Nechvatal began work on an opera called *XS: The Opera Opus* (1984-6) with the no wave musical composer Rhys Chatham. He began using computers and robotics to make post-conceptual paintings in 1986, and soon deployed Applesoft BASIC to code viral transformations within his body of work. His paintings and works on paper are focused on visual noise interferences, computer viruses, artificial life, and chaos theory as destabilizing forces that call one to consciousness and therefore lend themselves to a constructive, creative process. He exhibited his first computer-robotic paintings at Documenta 8 in 1987.

With a career spanning five decades, Nechvatal's work is held in several notable public collections, such as the Centre Pompidou, Paris, FR; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; The Art Institute of Chicago, IL; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; The Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY; The Jewish Museum, New York, NY; The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Buffalo AKG Art Museum, NY; Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas-Austin, TX; LACMA, Los Angeles, CA; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, SE; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.; and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA, along with many more.

Nechvatal has held numerous solo and two-person exhibitions throughout Europe and the United States at venues such as La Générale Nord-Est, Paris, FR; Galerie Richard, Paris, FR; Anthology Film Archives, New York, NY; Art Laboratory, Berlin, DE; The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH; Buffalo AKG, Buffalo, NY; The Kitchen, New York, NY, and many others. His work has been included in group shows at institutions such as The Centre Pompidou, Paris, FR; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, ES; The New Museum, New York, NY; Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, AT; Digital Culture Center, Milan, IT; Museo del Ferrocarril, San Luis Potosí, MX; Château de Montsoreau Museum of Contemporary Art, Montsoreau, FR; Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, DE; and the Minneapolis Institute of Art, MN.

Nechvatal is known as an art theoretician and his publishing practice runs parallel to his studio practice. His book *Towards an Immersive Intelligence: Essays on the Work of Art in the Age of Computer Technology and Virtual Reality* (1993-2006) was published by Edgewise Press in 2009, and in 2011 his book *Immersion Into Noise* was published by the University of Michigan Libraries Scholarly Publishing Office in conjunction with the Open Humanities Press. It was then published in a 2nd edition in 2022. Nechvatal has also published two poetry books with Punctum Press: *Destroyer of Naivetés* (2015) and *Styling Sagaciousness* (2022). In 2023 his 1995 cybersex farce novella ~~~~~~venus©~Ñ~vibrator, was published by Orbis Tertius Press, who is also publishing its sequel, *Venus Voluptuous in the Loins of The Last God*, in 2025.

Nechvatal earned his Ph.D. in the philosophy of art and new technology at The Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts (CAiA) at the University of Wales, Newport, UK in 1999 and taught in the MFA program at the School of Visual Arts in New York, NY from 1999–2014. He is one of five artists that art historian Patrick Frank examines in his 2024 book *Art of the 1980s: As If the Digital Mattered*. The Joseph Nechvatal archive is housed at The Fales Library Downtown Collection at the NYU Special Collections Library in New York City. He lives and works in Paris, FR.