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# SURFACE

## Austin Lee's Uncanny Visions of Our Tech-Saturated Universe

Across a new series of airbrushed paintings, life-size sculptures, and digital animations, the New York artist's blobby creations reflect technology's impact on the human psyche.

BY NADJA SAYEJ

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If anyone makes paintings that look like Play-Doh figurines, it's New York artist Austin Lee. Whimsical humanoid figures lack elbows and knees on his canvases, which forge a dream world of their own that could very well be populated by gummy bears. Fittingly, his cartoonish, Pop Art-inspired universe nods to virtual reality, the internet, and the metaverse—tangible, yet intangible—and their implications on the human psyche. His fantastical visions, which encompass still life paintings and Rorschach-inspired forms to fuzzy portraits of blobby family members mid-embrace, are on view at Jeffrey Deitch in New York for his latest solo exhibition, “Like It Is,” which features 19 new artworks across airbrushed paintings, lifesize 3D-printed sculptures, and digital animation.

Lee composed every artwork in the exhibition in virtual reality before translating them into physical objects. Since his last outing with the gallery, in 2018, he's drawn inspiration from software—and the moguls that helped

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make technology ubiquitous. One painting depicts Microsoft founder Bill Gates splayed out suggestively across a desk with dated desktop computer monitors, bringing to mind a promotional (and, decades later, internet viral) 1985 photoshoot that helped bring Windows 1.0 to the fore. Another like-minded painting shows a somber Jeff Bezos hunched over a table adorned with flowers eating an iguana. “The original photos were interesting on their own,” Lee says, “so I wanted to quote them rather than turn them into something completely new.”



Musings on technology continue in a 3D-printed sculpture, *Mirror*, which shows a figure seated in front of a desktop computer—a scene that nods to a George Segal work from a cover of *Time* in 1983, portending technology’s impending takeover. “In my lifetime, I’ve seen computer software and hardware innovations change the way humans interact at a pace that’s hard to keep up with,” Lee says. “These images and fantasies have become intertwined with our lives in a way that influences our own perception of reality.”

One such innovation is augmented reality, a format viewers can use to view a sculpture on the gallery’s roof by using an Instagram filter. “Over the past year, I’ve gotten better at using 3D modeling tools to define atmosphere and space,” said Lee. “That’s really interesting to use in painting language since it’s a new way to render light or create realistic scenes of unreal things.”

As for what’s next? Lee is working on a children’s book alongside Philippe Karrer from Spheres Publications and, of course, his next body of work: “I’ll just keep making paintings and sculptures and videos and see where that leads me.”

“Austin Lee: Like It Is” will be on display at Jeffrey Deitch Gallery (76 Grand Street, New York), until April 23.