

Joseph

Nechvatal

Paintings

1986-1987



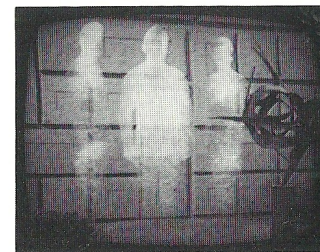
Rare Perfume, 1987

Foreword

I remember as a child, sitting in front of a late 50's tube television, fascinated by no program in particular, but by the hypnotic flickering patterns of light emanating from the screen. When you turned those early sets off, the image became a smaller and smaller rectangle, finally reduced to a lingering dot in the center of the black screen. As that dot slowly faded into nothingness, I tried to perceive the exact moment of its disappearance, which was a futile exercise. I wondered what happened to the picture when everybody's TV was turned off. With no screen to alight upon, where did all those dancing electrons go?

Other memories from that techno-impressionistic period come into view . . . The Phantom Zone in *Superman* comic books, where Kryptonese convicts were dematerialized by a big ray gun into cosmic limbo, banished forever to incorporeality . . . Or the popular science fiction notion of early television broadcasts being picked up years later by a civilization light years away, just as

we see the light of some distant star long after the actual star may have exploded. Somewhere in the universe there might be a spot where decades of accumulated TV images commingle, however distorted, jangled and dissipated by collisions with asteroids and warped by the paths of comets. It occurs to me that these images would likely resemble the shimmering, spectral presences of Joseph Nechvatal's computer/robotic assisted paintings. Have I found at last where some of those dancing electrons landed?



Star Trek, 1966

— B.R.B., February, 1988



Compassion Rules the Destruction of the Regime, 1986-87

The Ghost of Electricity

Is the next step in evolution to be the transformation of man into nothing more than electronic patterns?
by Barry Blinderman

— Alan Watts, *The Book*, 1966

Joseph Nechvatal's recent paintings are eerie dot-matrix apparitions of technology's manifest destiny — the dissolution of boundaries through science. Man creates in his own image: the telephone, television and computer are literal projections of our perceptual and cognitive mechanisms. In effect, the digital/electronics revolution has supplied us with a colossal external nervous system that has radically altered our concepts of space, simultaneity and individuality. With an unprecedented saturation of hallucinatory imagery, the specular regime of television, film and photography transforms society into a phantasmagoria, removing us from the reality of the world while pretending to capture it. Technology, the great equalizer, has achieved through mass-media overload the erasure of difference: images of real horror are neutralized by their coexistence with game shows and liquor advertisements. TV is the most direct form of mind-to-mind communication, delivering the masses wholesale to the corporate sponsors.

A certain amount of contempt for the material employed to express an idea is indispensable to the purest realization of this idea.

— Man Ray

Within the confines of a computer-efficient society, scathing visions poke through the glacier of sameness that has advanced upon us. Nechvatal's belief in technology's promised new channels of perception is tempered by his awareness of the accompanying threat of societal/nuclear disintegration. It is this paradox which lends his work its conceptual and political tension. His paintings are, in fact, executed by robotic arms spewing computer-commanded jets of red, yellow, blue and black pigment onto canvases up to twelve feet wide — using the same state of the art process which currently creates advertisement billboards.

Nechvatal's involvement with media imagery and production tools dates back to 1980, when he began exhibiting intimately scaled graphite drawings comprising saturated, interwoven line tracings of pictures culled from newspapers and magazines. Irrational juxtapositions of images and scale were submerged into an all-over abstract network. He later produced photographically enlarged details of these drawings, onto which he sprayed bands or atmospheric areas of color. Photo-silkscreened images on canvas preceded his use of the computer to digitize, enlarge and "paint" his current work.



The forms of art are always preformed and meditated. The creative process is always an academic routine and sacred procedure. Everything is prescribed and proscribed. Only in this way is there no grasping or clinging to anything. Only a standard form can be imageless, only a stereotyped image can be formless, only a formularized art can be formulaless.

— Ad Reinhardt, "Timeless in Asia"

Just a Thought, 1983

Nechvatal's working philosophy is akin to Ad Reinhardt's embrace of Eastern concepts of vacuity, repetition and refinement — a quest to push substance to the verge of immateriality. As Reinhardt programmatically erased signs of individual gesture, working in series resembling production lines, Nechvatal distances his touch from the work long before it is digitized by computer and executed by robotic arms. He manipulates his original drawings or photographs through a complex process involving slide projection, re-photography, and video.

Nechvatal's work extends the dimensions of Reinhardt's existential Void through the metaphorical implications of electronic imagery. Ethereal impulses that are transmitted, received, and ultimately left to drift in the far reaches of space are likened to our transient corporeal presence in a continuum of being and nonbeing. Caught in a labyrinthine web of spectral resonance, images emerge and recede like impulses from the pool of the unconscious. The collective wreckage of history is washed ashore on laser-scanned waves. Altimira's urgent talismans move among the shadows of Plato's cave, transforming into new mythologies whose heroes are yet unchosen.

Catalogue of the Exhibition

Transconceptual Interconnected Causalities, 1987
computer/robotic assisted acrylic on canvas
64 x 90 inches
collection of Fred Alger Management, New York

The Information Cult's Panopticonic Subject as Decentered Data, 1986
computer/robotic assisted acrylic on canvas
97½ x 139 inches
private collection, New York

Compassion Rules the Destruction of the Regime, 1986-87
computer/robotic assisted acrylic on canvas
91 x 121 inches
courtesy of Brooke Alexander, New York

The Freer, 1987
computer/robotic assisted acrylic on canvas
86 x 125 inches
courtesy of Brooke Alexander, New York

Rare Perfume, 1987
computer/robotic assisted acrylic on canvas
90 x 132 inches
Speyer Family collection, New York

Power Trance Endor, 1987
computer/robotic assisted acrylic on canvas
48 x 74 inches
collection of Noel Vietor, New York

Plunging Resistance, 1987
computer/robotic assisted acrylic on canvas
96 x 74 inches overall
courtesy of Brooke Alexander, New York

Peak, 1987
computer/robotic assisted acrylic on canvas
28 x 46 inches
courtesy of Brooke Alexander, New York

Golden Joy Club, 1987
computer/robotic assisted acrylic on canvas
28 x 62½ inches
courtesy of Brooke Alexander, New York