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info@rulegallery.com 303-800-6776



Broad Skepticism

“History of the Future” questions technology as today’s religion

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Over the past several years, TED talks have become a staple of everyday life. A coworker or family member emails you a bite-sized piece of wisdom or novel idea that could be the solution to a global problem — or at least a solution to your problem, whatever it may be. Many of the presentations showcase the latest in technology to a crowd of hungry viewers, anxious for the latest developments.

It was watching a TED talk that helped inspire artist Nathan Abels’ latest exhibit.

“This guy had an LED drone in his hand. He brings it out on stage and the lights dim to create really dramatic lighting,” Abels says. “I thought it looked like a sermon. Like a religious leader holding a candle in his hand, this little LED light lit up his face in the same way.”

When the drone left the speaker’s hands, Abels noticed ecstatic faces in the crowd.

“They looked completely blown away as this little light flew around the room,” he says. “It looked like the imagery I’d see in cathedrals or churches where people would be very wide eyed looking at this very mystical thing happening in front of them.”

Abels depicted the scene in his painting “The Light of the Setting Sun,” part of his exhibit History of the Future, now on display at Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art through May 28. The painting shows a silhouetted figure on stage, cradling a light with the utmost attention, as if its power is divine in nature.



Nathan Abels,
The Light of Setting Suns

In *History of the Future*, Abels juxtaposes technology and religion, comparing and contrasting the two, presenting the question of whether technology has become a modern-day religion.

In his paintings and ceramics, Abels blends the two elements together. In “Adoration” a man crouches in the grass in astonishment while gazing at a screen, almost as if it’s a religious text. In “Rejoice” a crowd surrounds a mysterious light in the sky with their hands raised — it’s a painting Abels created by pairing images from a Christian rock concert and a SpaceX launch.

Apart from the TED-talk inspiration, Abels says he’s been interested in the themes of the show for quite a while. He consistently questions the role technology plays in his life, and he’s noticed more people doing the same. Through research on the topic, Abels has become interested in how society defines progress, wondering if mechanization is actually making our lives easier or better.

“It’s something that a lot of people are asking themselves. Even technology itself has responded. We have apps to limit our use of apps,” he says. “There is some skepticism in a broad sense, but I think my degree of skepticism is a little farther out than some of my peers.”

Like most, Abels has noticed technology’s takeover of day-to-day life, citing examples of being in a room where everyone’s on their phone or being at a

concert where fans watch the show through a screen. He says it’s an accumulation of those small moments that build up to create the frustration he feels.

The *History of the Future* dissects what Abels calls the religion of technology. Through his analysis, Abels saw the common threads between the two. Like faith, Abels sees society putting an emphasis on technology as holding all-mighty solutions for mankind’s problems.

“People put the same kinds of hopes in technological progress as people have put in religious contexts,” he says. “We’re sold this idea that the more of these things we adopt — Wi-Fi light bulbs and electric this or that — the more technology we have, the easier our life will be. If that were the case then everybody I know should have a lot of free time and be stress free and leisurely, and that’s not what I’m seeing.”

Throughout the show, Abels never establishes a clear timeline. He blends historical techniques, like medieval painting or Neolithic pottery, with modern imagery. By blending time periods in the show, Abels brings history to the forefront while examining how the future will archive present day.

Some of the artworks in the exhibit depict the more ominous side of the tech race. In “Drone Hunters,” two armed men stand over a drone they shot out of the sky. The piece, Abel says, alludes to the people who push back against these intrusive developments. In “Coverage,” a snow-covered scene shows a man crawling toward a cell phone tower.



Nathan Abels, *Rejoice*



Nathan Abels, *Drone Hunters* (left), *Coverage* (right)

“I was thinking about how far people might go to stay connected and how disappointing that would be, to find a cell tower at the top of Mount Everest,” he says.

Viewers might also recognize a famous face in *History of the Future*. Abels paints Elon Musk as a saint in “*Sic Itur Ad Astra* (thus you shall go to the stars)” and “*Omne Ignatum Pro Magnifico* (every unknown thing appears magnificent).”

“Are these figures like Elon Musk worthy of our praise or adoration? ... When these newer things come around, or new versions, everybody seems to react in that way that it must be magnificent, and I’m not sure that just because it’s new or unknown it is indeed magnificent or has as much relevance to my life,” Abels says. “What relevance does sending a car to outer space have to the average person? I don’t really think that these new gadgets are going to do much for people’s qualities of life. And therefore, I think there will be a lot of disappointment in the future.”

Abels says he sees shallow connections replacing deep relationships and quantity trumping quality. As a teacher, Abels also sees a loss of “our ability to think.”

“When I’ve talked to some of my students about their ideas for art or for their next piece, I’ll ask them what their idea is and then almost immediately they’ll grab their phone and start scrolling.”

With the show, Abels isn’t calling for the end of all technological innovation. His overall goal is to challenge the viewer. He wants the audience to think about technology’s function and whether it’s saving time or fulfilling any of its many promises. In the bigger picture, what does progress really mean, and if we put our faith in machines, what does that bring us?

This idea of questioning progress is nothing new. Abels says he was inspired by an early 20th century quote from German art historian and theorist Aby Warburg who said, “Myth and symbols strive to form spiritual bonds between man and the world around him... creating the space for devotion and reflection: a space destroyed by instantaneous electrical connection.”

Abels says Warburg understood how some developments could affect people, and that Warburg and other writers were wary of even early advancements like basic electricity or the telegram. By filling life with technology, there would be no space for quiet and contemplation. A problem that has only become more exacerbated.

“To me that goes back to the noise that these gadgets have in our lives and not having any time to think,” he says. “That also applies to not having any time to reflect, to consider, to ponder. We fill those gaps with scrolling and noise, music and Netflix. It erases time for reflection or, in [Warburg’s] context, devotion.”

And as Abels suggests in the exhibit, this devotion has potentially become warped by these machines we pour so much of ourselves into. Plus, with the constant bombardment of notifications and upgrades, there’s no time to question its role in our life.

What will the incessant scrolling result in? Meaning? Purpose? Enlightenment?

“A lot of times you don’t even know what you’re looking for. And I do it too,” Abels says. “It’s strange when you take a step back from it and wonder, ‘What am I actually looking for?’”

On the Bill: A History of the Future. Through May 28.
Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. 1750 13th St.