

Whangārei Art Museum

Jon Rafman ; ʻānūshānū ʻānū ʻānū

21 December 2024 – 23 March 2025

Jon Rafman

● Oh, the humanity!

;ላገገህጃሠህሃ ጭገ ፊላሚኒዮን presents a series of films by Jon Rafman created between 2013 and 2021. Combining found images, custom animations and 3D models with footage from video games and other sources, Rafman constructs uncanny digital landscapes that feel at once nostalgic and disorienting. His fragmented, non-linear approach to narrative mirrors the circular way stories are told in digital spaces, where everything becomes a hyperlink to a hyperlink, with sidebars and rabbit holes replacing beginnings, middles and ends.

The exhibition has been divided into two “sides,” one showing the dense and introspective *A Man Digging*, *Remember Carthage* and *Legendary Reality*, and the other the confronting and visceral *Poor Magic*, *Disasters Under the Sun* and *Shadowbanned*. There is also a seventh video, *Punctured Sky*, situated in a hidden storage area behind the galleries, in which themes of memory, nostalgia and the loss of self in digital spaces offer a complement to (and commentary on) the other works.



Jon Rafman, *Disasters Under The Sun* (2019)

The films in the first group are characterised by heavy narration and a focus on the idea of an individual’s journey towards an ill-defined goal, perhaps of self-discovery or personal redemption. Here, stories become simulated replacements for lives, as the boundaries between fantasy and reality break down, filtered through a digital miasma of crumbling yet beguiling computer-generated pseudo-spaces.

In *Remember Carthage*, the narrator attempts to find refuge from the idea of depth or interiority in the Las Vegas Strip, ultimately lamenting that “it did not pretend to be anything other than its surface, but the people ruined it for me.” This statement is complicated by the fact that the version of Las Vegas shown to the viewer is not the place itself, but the Google Earth elevation map, an eerie, hollow shell captured by satellite photography. Elsewhere, in *Legendary Reality*, another (or the same) narrative voice chillingly reflects that, in the course of attempting to repair or rediscover a sense of happiness within the self, he has arrived at a point where “the wind isn’t howling outside anymore, it’s howling within me,” suggesting that the entropic void without is now internal. Here, the digital space that promised enlightenment has ultimately become an inescapable, steel-jawed trap—a cruel inversion of the Orphic quest.

The films in the second group are less personal in tone and more aggressively physical, dealing with issues around digital embodiment. In *Disasters Under the Sun*, Rafman uses physics simulations on simple ragdolls to model nightmare scenarios in which implacable, impersonal machines crush, launch and impact crowds of human bodies. Here, rather than a serene pastoral, the digital space resembles an automated trauma factory, where fragile, faceless bodies are subjected to forces beyond their control or comprehension.

The idea of the digital space as a trap is made fully manifest in *Poor Magic*, in which the narrator ominously states that “If you can’t sleep, it means you are awake in somebody else’s dream.” This digital dream-space becomes increasingly visceral, as the camera passes through wet, fleshy esophageal tubes, seemingly violating the integrity of the body itself. *Shadowbanned*, the last of these three films, begins with perhaps the most chilling statement yet: “This is not a story. There are no more stories.” The idea of narrative itself has collapsed, replaced instead by a bewildering avalanche of data. It is no longer possible to separate signal from ground, noise from information or cause from effect. This, Rafman suggests, is the ultimate fate that awaits humanity in the digital realm; not only post-truth, but post-informational, a state in which user and machine are indistinguishable, and consciousness itself can only meander aimlessly, like his camera as it laboriously plods through cable-choked conduits.

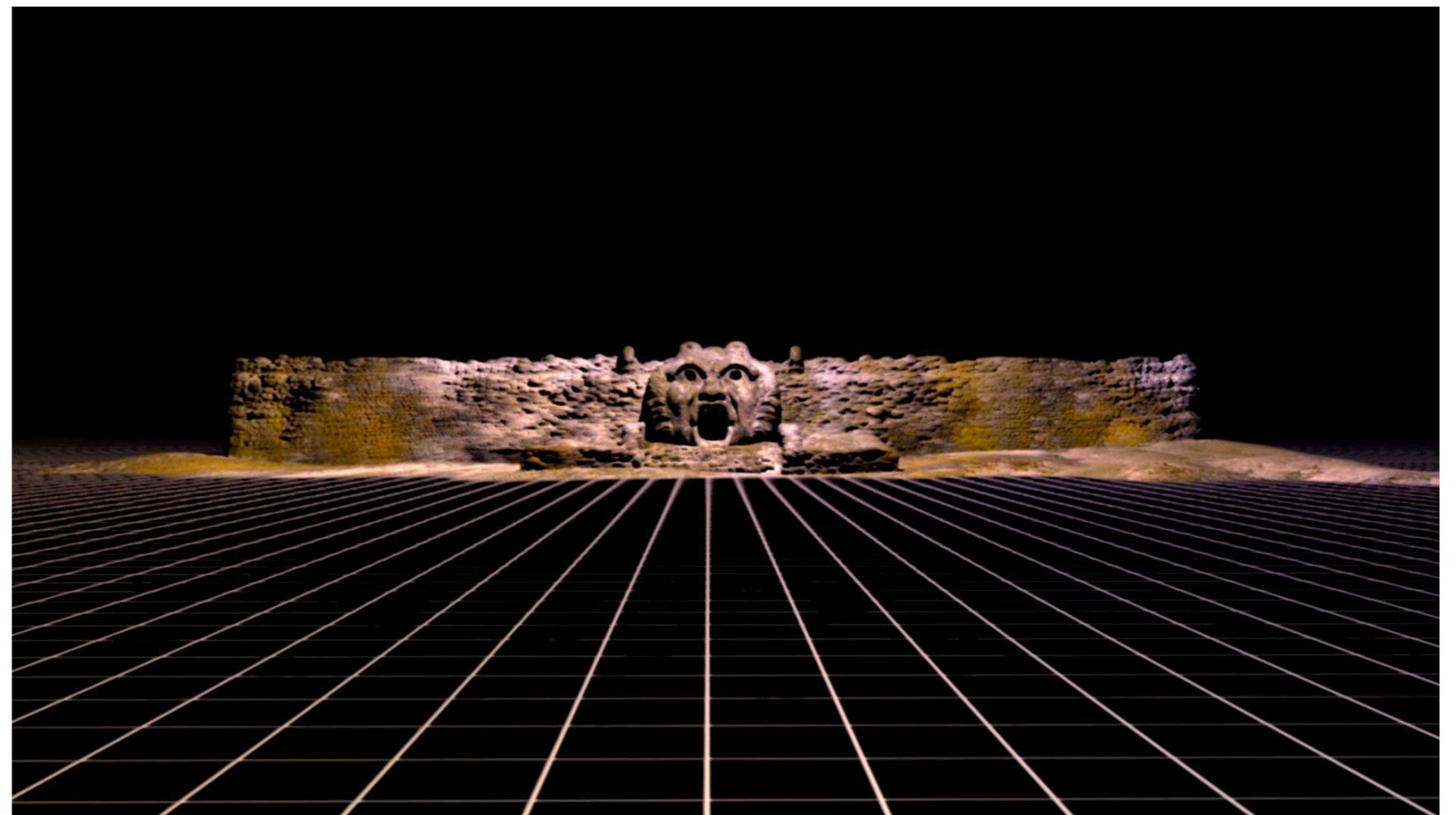
Punctured Sky, the longest work and also the one structured the most like a conventional film narrative, takes place mostly in the “real” world, represented in a grotesque, aggressively distasteful animated photo-collage style. Here, humans take on bestial, animalistic characteristics, becoming crude flesh-puppets whose nature renders them inadmissible in the sterile world of a dreamed-of digital arcadia. It is only when the narrator ventures into the world of an online video game that we see “normal” looking people—but these are only digital simulacra, perhaps of an ideal that no longer exists, or never did.

The film loosely follows a noir story structure, as the protagonist moves from environment to environment—hobby shop, internet cafe, messageboard, online game, corporate office, hospital—in search of his quarry. However, the work is ultimately concerned not with the pursuit of knowledge but with a void or lack of meaning within the self.

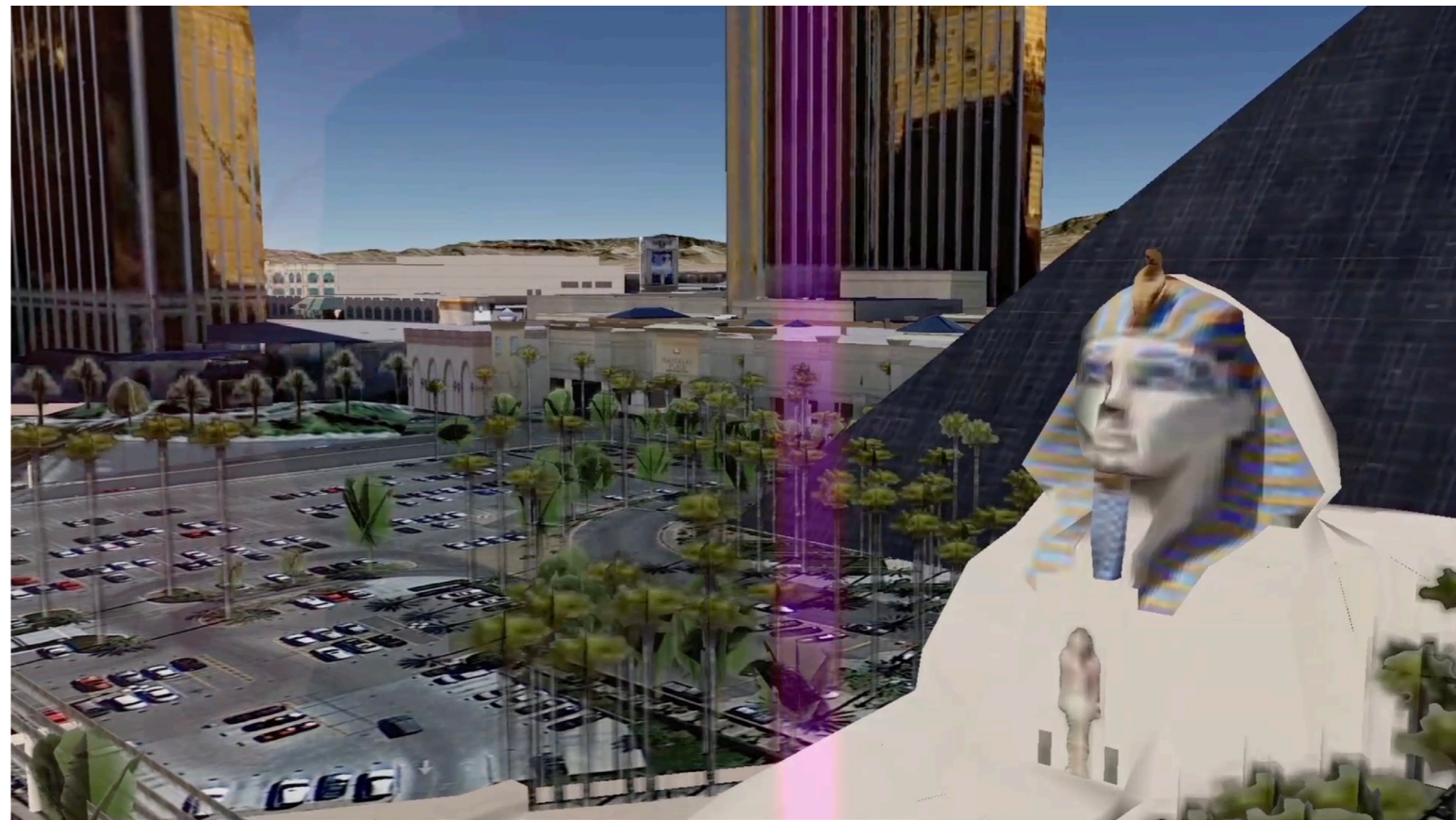
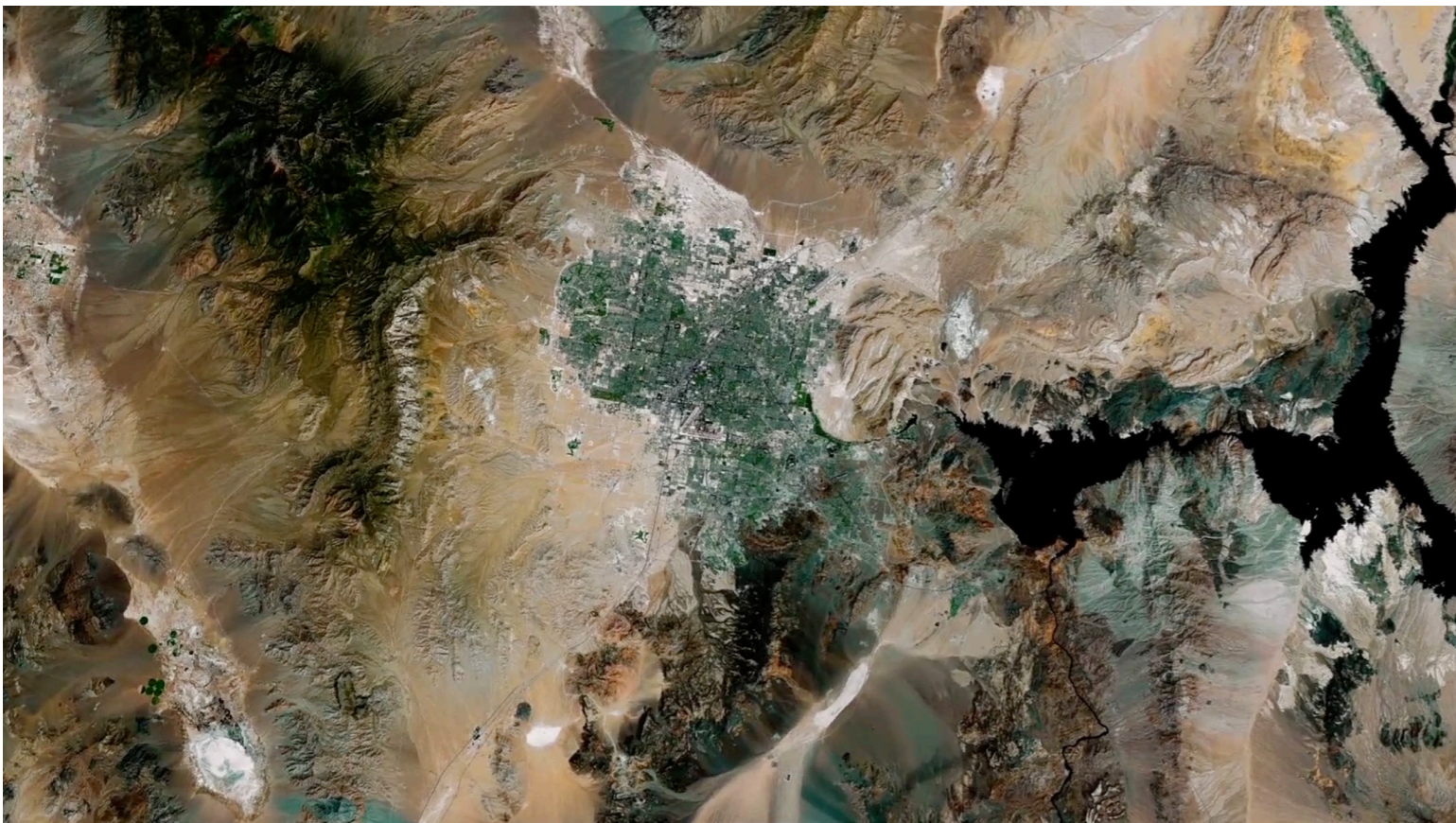
4 Jon Rafman: *ገላገላዎች ላይ* 'ሃዐ

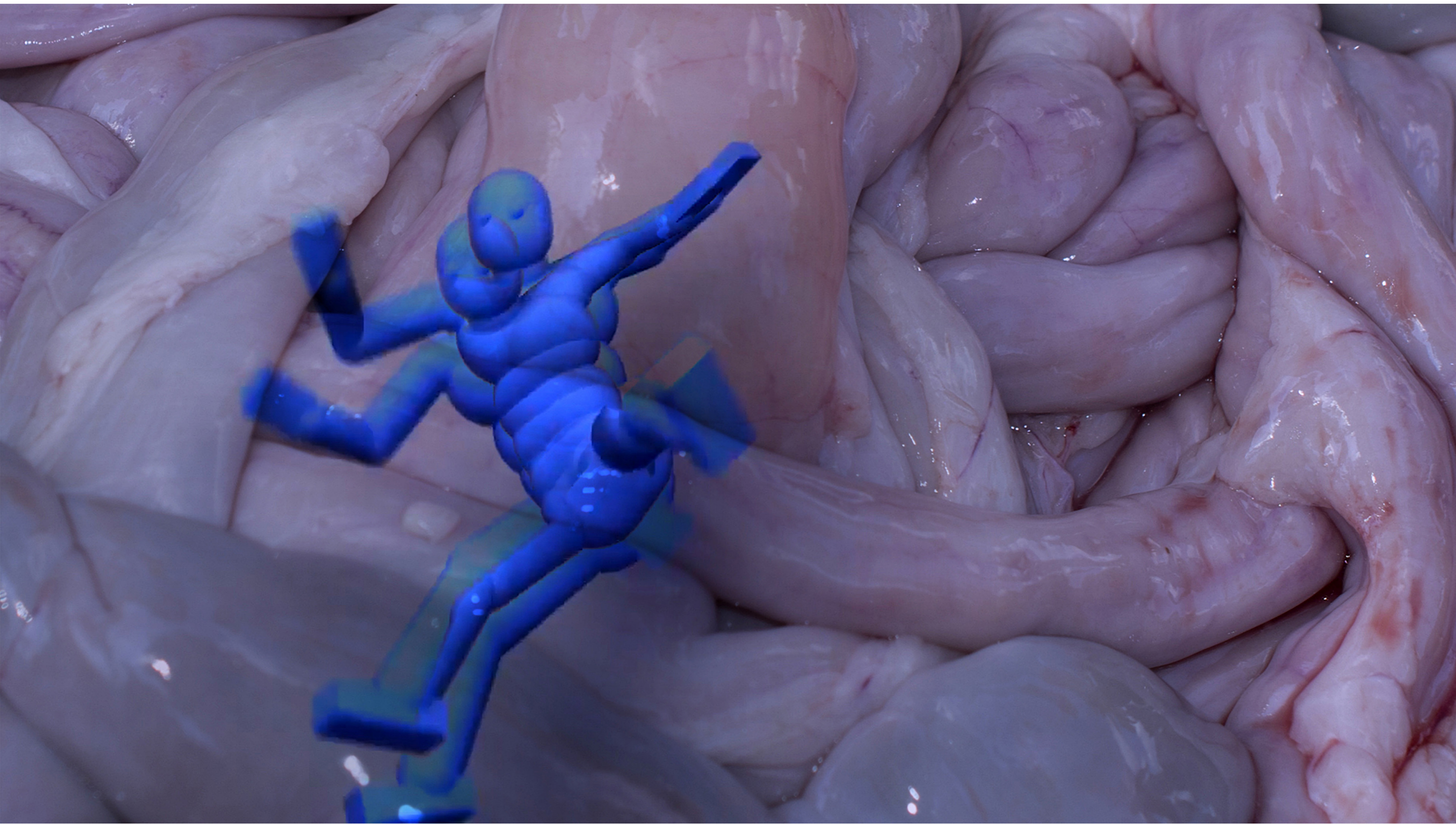
Rafman suggests that digital spaces, even those innocuously encountered in childhood, have the capacity to drain the colour and value from life, while themselves remaining ultimately hollow, mysterious and impenetrable.

In *ገላገላዎች ላይ* 'ሃዐ, Rafman delivers a harrowing meditation on the digital era's fraught promises, and how they may have ultimately been broken. As identity dissolves into pixels, and narratives disassemble into hyperlinks, the exhibition asks: What remains when the human experience is filtered through a simulacrum? Rafman's vision, both mesmerising and profoundly unsettling, suggests that the answer may be nothing at all.

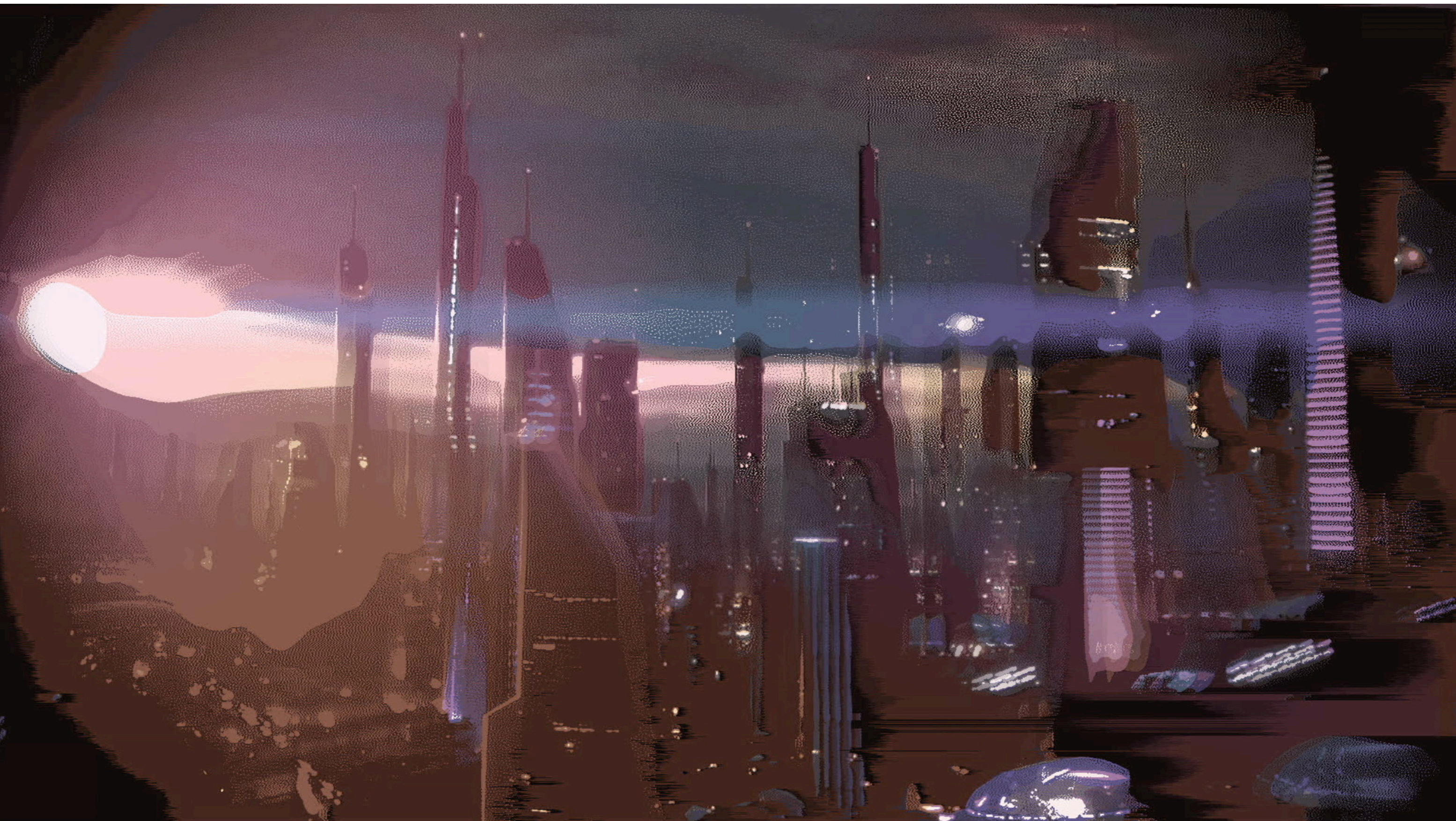


Jon Rafman, *Shadowbanned* (2018)











Works list

1. Jon Rafman *A Man Digging* (2013) 8:20
2. Jon Rafman *Remember Carthage* (2013) 13:43
3. Jon Rafman *Legendary Reality* (2017) 15:43

4. Jon Rafman *Poor Magic* (2017) 7:08
5. Jon Rafman *Disasters Under the Sun* (2019) 7:54
6. Jon Rafman *Shadowbanned* (2018) 7:58

7. Jon Rafman *Punctured Sky* (2021) 21:07

