

## Michael Najjar: Augmented Realities 1997–2008

### Future Fast Forward Wind

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What does the future of humankind look like? This is the key question that floats over the major Michael Najjar exhibition now on view at The Hague Museum of Photography and GEM Museum of Modern Art. Featuring works from 1997 to 2008 in over 800 square meters of exhibition space, the show gives a comprehensive overview of the creative output of this media artist, born in 1966 in Landau and living and working in Berlin since the early 1990s.

The lavishly spacious setting gives the visitor plenty of opportunity to trace the development of Najjar's visual reference system from its beginnings to the present day. The title given to the exhibition is not intended as a mission statement by the curator but is rather derived organically from the nature of the works on show – *Augmented Realities* means the computer assisted extension of the way we perceive reality. In his earliest series *viva fidel!: a journey into absurdity*, Najjar is still visibly at play, digitally swapping cigarettes for dollar bills. The micro format of the works nurtures intimacy, inviting the viewer to approach and explore modes of perception in close exchange. Later on in the exhibition, however, the viewer's sense of perception is subject to more daunting challenges. To collect the material for his unsettling visual experiments, Najjar seeks out some very particular locations, from the neurology labs at the Berlin Charité hospital to a bleak industrial zone on the outskirts of Detroit. It was there at the *Cryonics Institute* that the artist photographed the white aluminum tanks for his *bionic angel* work series, tanks in which dead human bodies are flash frozen in nitrogen in hopes of a later resurrection. Even so, his photography is devoid of the splintered aesthetics of a chamber of horrors. With surgical precision Najjar dissects the initial analog image, bringing sterile beauty to life. The computer is his operating table, Photoshop his artistic scalpel. It was in 1997 that Najjar first placed computer-supported expansion of reality at the service of a higher truth. Ever since

then his has been a quest for an image of the future, for the shape of humankind to come as formed in the framework of our technological society.

Najjar's visions of the future confront the visitor with disconcerting directness. As revealed in the fixed gaze of the computer-modified pupils of the bionic upgraded beings *tayga\_2.0* and *dieter\_2.0*, the portrait series *nexus project part I* fuses the human body and software to a technoid form of life, while the series *information and apocalypse* also manifests Najjar's skepticism about absolute truths – particularly those so frequently mouthed by the media and politicians. A combination of TV screen shots photographed by the artist and battle scenes staged in his studio, the densely hung photo and video works are a massive assault on our ingrained ways of perception. They are an urgent call for us to question the type of "truth" contained in the media images we have made our staple diet.

Paradoxically, there is no real image of Dubai, New York or Shanghai to be found in his city series *netropolis*, for it requires an "expanded reality" to approach a sense of what the megacity of the future might look like. Photographed from the highest vantage point of each city, Najjar uses the computer to overlay views of all four points of the compass with a specially programmed algorithm calculating the intensity of each superimposed layer. The result is a material depiction of information density as a portrait of the future city.

The last of the rooms dedicated to Najjar's current series *bionic angel* could almost be a lesson in cultural history. The large format exhibits in their white frames transform the exhibition space into a sacral arena in which the genesis of the future is enacted. Based on idealized representations of the body from antiquity, these hybrid bodies and machines are eloquent evocations of humankind's undying wish for immortality. In the midst of these monumental works a cylindrical video box is placed with a slit giving us access to the sphere of the future. The video work *the singularity* shows humming robot arms wrapped in plastic at work on some unrecognizable material. The accompanying music sequence deals with the myth of Prometheus, creator of humanity. Suddenly, we see an open wound and drops of blood. Could the machine be creating a human being? With such starkly powerful images, the artist

catapults us into future time. Because, as any visitor to the exhibition soon realizes, "The future is on fast forward wind!"