
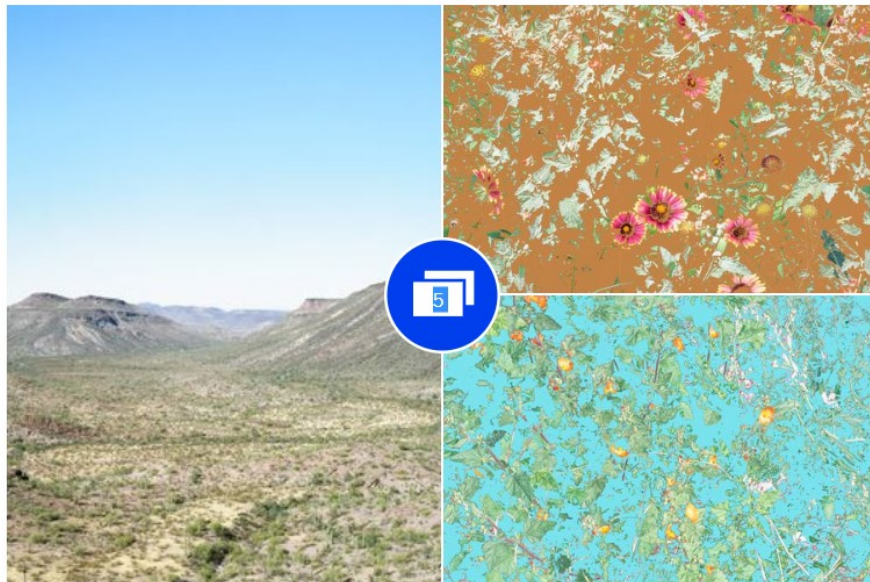


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# Aaron Rothman's desert landscapes explore the technological sublime in "Signal Noise" show at Transformer Station

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By [Steven Litt, cleveland.com](#)

CLEVELAND, Ohio — The British landscape painter J.M.W. Turner famously [claimed](#) that he had himself tied to the mast of a steamship at sea during a winter snowstorm in 1842 so he could paint the violent forces of nature from direct experience.

Turner's paintings of swirling clouds and mountainous waves embodied the theory of the [sublime](#) in art, first articulated by the ancient Greek philosopher [Longinus](#) and revived in the 18th-century by English statesman and philosopher [Edmund Burke](#).

Burke was intrigued by nature's terrifying power and vastness, as revealed through stormy seas, mountain landscapes, or the notion of infinity, in which the eye is unable to "perceive the bounds" of something or to "see an object distinctly."

The sublime as a driving concept in the history of landscape art re-emerges in the 21st century photographs and digitally-altered photo-images of [Aaron Rothman](#), now on view at the [Transformer Station](#) gallery in Hingetown.

Organized by the [Cleveland Museum of Art](#), the show explores 15 years' worth of work by the artist, based in Phoenix, Ariz., whose primary subject is sunbaked desert landscapes of the American Southwest.

On view are more than two-dozen images ranging from minimalist photos of nearly featureless blue skies to crystal clear desert panoramas punctuated with saguaro cacti.

### **Invitation to exploration**

The landscapes beckon you to visually explore sculpted mesas and rocky hills. They're the kinds of vistas that could trick you into thinking that a distant hill is so close you could easily reach it on foot, only to discover that it's much farther than you thought and you wish you'd brought a second water bottle.

In one particular desert landscape, smoke from a distant fire obscures the horizon, erasing far off peaks in a veil of nothingness. It's a classic case in which the eye, as Burke observed, can't "perceive the bounds" of something or "see an object distinctly."

Rothman also presents images of scenes infinitely vast and infinitely small, ranging from complex closeup images of desert flowers and rocks to photos that depict the Milky Way through luminous pin pricks of red, green and blue.

The stellar landscapes are a product of visual "noise" produced by digital cameras, which Rothman has exaggerated to heighten the contrast between the primary "signal" in an image and the extraneous static produced as a byproduct of technology.



A closeup of one of Aaron Rothman's images of the Milky Way, which the artist processed to enhance the "noise" produced by digital technology. Steven Litt, Cleveland.com

The Milky Way images inspired the show's title, "Signal Noise," which underscores Rothman's exploration of classic landscape themes literally through a 21st century lens.

Burke and Turner would have recognized Rothman as a kindred spirit who reinterprets the sublime with a technological twist.

For 19th-century landscape painters, the sublime carried religious meanings. It was a way to convey the insignificance of mankind in the face of God's might and majesty. Landscape became a substitute for overtly religious imagery in an increasingly secular age as artists painted nature as a kind of immense outdoor church.

### **History of an idea**

These ideas morphed into abstraction in the 20th century, in the Abstract Expressionist paintings of Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still. Art historian [Robert Rosenblum](#) traced this evolution in his classic 1975 book on "Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition." Rothman updates the tradition with his own brand of the Southwestern technological sublime. In the 21st century, science has taken on the power to evoke the kinds of mysteries and vastness that once produced — and can still produce — a sense of religious awe.

Scientists use imaging equipment to probe inter-galactic space and trace the shape of time back to the Big Bang, or to probe infinitesimally tiny bits of elementary matter.

Rothman's portraits of our galaxy are a reminder of mankind's ability to reach for the stars in a quest to understand the history of the universe. They also underscore the ways in which technology shapes and frames human perception.

In his closeups of desert rocks and flora, Rothman uses software to separate shadows from the lighted sides of solid objects, and then substitutes pure tones of flat color for the shadowed areas.

As a result, he creates infinitely complex patterns of light, color and texture that frustrate and complicate the eye's typical ability to separate the objects in a field of vision from the surrounding background — a phenomenon known as figure-ground.



An installation shot of the Aaron Rothman exhibition at the Transformer Station gallery in Hingetown. Steven Litt, Cleveland.com

Rothman's explorations produce images that echo the fractal shapes that can appear in clouds or watery waves, or, for that matter, in the drip and pour paintings of Pollock.

The purely optical areas of color that replace the shadows in Rothman's closeup landscapes contrast strikingly with the crystalline or floral surfaces of rocks and flowers in the images, which appeal to the sense of touch.

Lastly, his desert closeups feature minutely complicated fields of interlocking shapes, outlined with tiny, precise, wiry outlines.

### **Kindred spirit**

These effects, produced through Rothman's technological process, bear an uncanny similarity to the shapes and outlines in early 20th-century abstractions of the American painter [Augustus Vincent Tack](#).

Tack painted cosmic landscapes inspired by clouds or mountains. His virtuoso explorations of the sublime were a bridge to the work of Ab-Ex painters such as Pollock, according to Rosenblum.

Rothman takes the conversation further, producing surprising resonances with art history. For example, one of his sun-baked desert landscapes takes the form of a triptych, a trio of images that recalls the Christian Trinity.



A trio of photo-images by Aaron Rothman depict a sunburnt landscape in the American Southwest. Steven Litt, Cleveland.com

Yet more than anything, Rothman's sun-baked colors and elimination of shadows communicates the overpowering presence of the sun as a force that nurtures life but could also scorch it in an era of climate change.

Rothman clearly evokes a sense of awe that connects his work with those of his 19th- and 20th-century predecessors. But his art is also possessed by a 21st century sense of unease over the future of the planet, which adds a new layer to the tradition of the sublime.

## **REVIEW**

**What's up:** "Signal Noise," works by Aaron Rothman.

**Venue:** Transformer Station.

**Where:** 1460 West 29th St., Cleveland.

**When:** Through Sunday, Aug. 23.

**Admission:** Free. Reserved, timed tickets required. Go to [transformerstation.org](http://transformerstation.org) or call 216-938-5429.