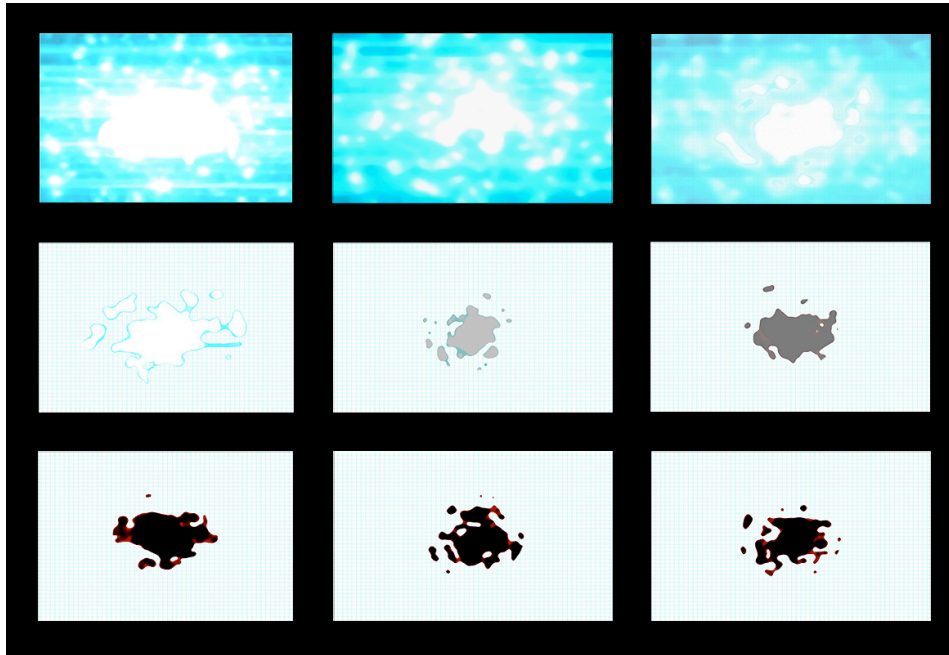


## Decoding images

Hema Vijay, Nov 30, 2014, DHNS:



**Hema Vijay talks to New York-based contemporary artist Jaret Vadera about his technology-inspired abstract works that tantalise viewers' vision...**

“We recollect a face and a place, and we think we have a picture of it in our mind. But actually there is nothing there — it is all synaptic firings and discharge of electricity along the nerves. Think about that,” muses Jaret Vadera, New York-

based interdisciplinary artist and cultural producer. That statement gives you an inkling on Vadera's art.

Intriguing thoughts are the key to his art, making him one of the most cerebral artists of our times. Originally from Toronto, Canada, Vadera who did his undergraduate education at the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto, the Cooper Union in New York, and his Masters in Fine Arts from the Yale University School of Art, has been creating quite a stir, and his works have been exhibited in avant garde venues including Tilton Gallery and the Queens Museum of Art.

As he puts it, Vadera is an artist who ‘explores the politics of vision, the hidden structures of power, and the layered processes through which we make sense of the worlds around and within us’.

Apart from his own artistic output, Vadera has also been having fun with a number of collaborative experiments like the one with writer James McGirk (a dialogical writing piece set in the future — around 2050); and curatorial projects such as ‘Ghosts and Machines’ at Rush Arts Gallery and Shifting Shapes — Unstable Signs at Yale University.

Vadera, an overseas citizen of India, has been travelling to India all his life and spends a few months in the country almost every year, when he gets to travel across the country, catch up with family, friends, and artists of course. “And since part of my work is site-specific, I can produce my work from whichever spot of the globe I am in, taking cues from the location,” he says.

This time though, Vadera is here on a fixed agenda, to commence his five-year fellowship at DakshinaChitra, the noted art, architecture and folk arts conservation centre near Chennai. The invitation for this fellowship had come from Meenakshi Thirukode, creative director of DakshinaChitra and a curator with whom Vadera has worked with in the past.

Someone who grew up in a melting point of cultures and thoughts, thanks to a multi-racial (half Indian and half Philippine) origin, and multi-cultural upbringing in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood, Vadera says, “Both my parents were working. As children, my brother and I were left to our own devices, and I grew up thinking about philosophical things like time and death. We would often take everything apart to see how they work and put them back together,” he recalls. That habit seems to have stuck with him over the years, and it finds place in the modus operandi of his art.

### **Paradox & technology**

For instance, Vadera is fascinated by paradoxes. Look at this ‘Light’ series. Normally, the closer we get to a picture or object, we expect to see more detail. In the ‘Light’ series, the opposite happens, and the image disappears as you walk towards it — a technological feat managed by Vadera, after a whole slew of processing measures he carried out on photographs from an old family album. This includes blowing up the images, painting them with airbrush, putting them behind plexi-glass, adding a layer of translucent mylar (a paper-plastic composite).

“We often keep photo albums, perhaps because they give us the licence to forget in everyday life,” muses Vadera. He continues, “Talking about photographs, don’t you find it curious that today most of our personal photographs look alike; they are mostly staged moments, with expected gestures and positioning, patterns...” Another aspect of this series is about memory and construction.

“There is no one drawer in the brain where we keep memories; it is in bits and pieces of data. When we access our memories, we make sense of it in the same way we make sense of the world; and the reality might be far different.” Vadera likes to push his boundaries as an artist. His works are not those that leave you with a resolution. They are works that prompt a pause, and plenty of pondering.

Technology fascinates him — in the inverse sense. “People talk about a sublime relationship with nature. I think it can be true of technology too. But I want to use technology to slow people down, rather than the opposite,” says Vadera. Vadera reckons that technology for technology’s sake is gimmicky.

Then there was Vadera’s 40-foot wall ‘Maya’ of ‘It is not an easy thing to meet the maker’, where he makes space itself a work of art. With the wall covered in wood panelling, the gallery was dark with a small hole in the wall; people looking through the hole found an abstract video of light reflecting off water and white ambiguous forms that transform. “There are different ways in which we think about consciousness and represent thoughts.”

### **The politics of vision**

In another one of his works, he sets about decoding images themselves. “Everything on an image on the monitor is an amalgam of thousands of dots kept on grids with a hidden structure. I wanted to take a view of the grid behind the image,” he shares. In this work, he averaged out the dots putting them on a ‘y axis-x axis’ co-ordinates and obtained a series of vertical lines.

His other works include a series that had images of eye diseases from an old medical journal, correlating this (flawed or divergent) vision with the ways we view images or situations in our own lives.

This work looks at vision as a digestive process. “In digestion, we take in something, break it down and use the stuff we want. Vision is similar too. It is about the politics of vision, how we see or believe something.” Search engines fascinate him too. “They shape what we see”. So do info-graphics seen in newspapers and magazines. “We have a default trust in them”

He concedes that the challenge with abstract art for the lay viewer is that most people don’t know where to enter the art construct. “There is a romantic belief that feelings ‘have to happen’, art has to happen too. Everybody experiences the world in their own terms. So it is with art.

And finally, Vadera is an artist who credits art to have opened his eyes, much more than its much-touted reverse paradigm. He says, “We think of things in the static condition. But they are shifting all the time. Sometimes I try just to see how things happen. That keeps things exciting for me. And I look forward to finding myself.”