

The Big New

## TBN PROJECTS

2940 Leonis Blvd, Vernon, CA, 90058

CHRISTIAN LOCK

*Technostic Transmissions*

November 4th - December 8th, 2023

### Christian Lock's *TechGnostic Transmissions*

Catalogue essay by Michael Newall

Christian Lock works in the “expanded field” of abstract painting. His past practice has integrated subcultural influences, especially from surf culture, with gestural expression, color-field painting, collage and assemblage, locating them alongside the metaphysical concerns of early twentieth-century abstraction. His new work presents ambitious experiments with materials, surface, texture, and spray-painted pigment. These are entry points to explorations of intense visual experience, especially color experience. For Lock, like the early twentieth-century abstractionists, color brings with it a spiritual awareness. Lock also finds spiritual potential in technologically-mediated flows of energy and information. The colors, grids and geometric elements of his new work draw on these ideas, giving powerful and moving form to ideas that are at once visual, technological and cosmic.



*Technostic Transmissions*  
oil, polyurethane and synthetic polymer on canvas  
57.9 x 70.5 in  
2023

#### Color

Lock tells me that the intense blue that he uses in this series comes from the blue color one can see when you press or rub your closed eyes. Such color effects are called phosphenes. For some, these colors are just the electrical flickering of the visual system as it is prodded and pressed. For Lock, these colors are a symptom of another reality beyond or outside our physical world. Over a century ago, Kandinsky described similar beliefs. When one experiences colors unattached to or independent of physical objects in the world, we see the non-physical, spiritual character of color. This was most apparent in his synaesthetic experience of color: intricate arrangements of colors prompted by music but attached to no physical surface. More recently, philosophers have argued for the non-physical character of color experience. In a famous thought experiment, devised by philosopher Frank Jackson, we are asked to imagine a scientist, named Mary, who knows everything about the physics of color and its optical and neural processing, but has not herself experienced color because for her

entire life she has remained in a room painted and furnished only in black and white.<sup>1</sup> (And, we will want to add, she has never pressed her eyes and seen Lock's colored phosphenes.) Jackson asks, does Mary experience anything new when she leaves her black and white room for the first time, and sees the world in color? Jackson says yes – she learns what it is like to see all the colors, the intense blue of the sky, the yellow of the sun, and so on. But Mary already knows every physical fact about color vision. So, what is it that she has learned? She has learned a non-physical fact – and it follows that what she has learned, what *blueness* is like as an experience, is non-physical. It is a short jump from there to understanding our experiences of color as having a meaningfully spiritual character.

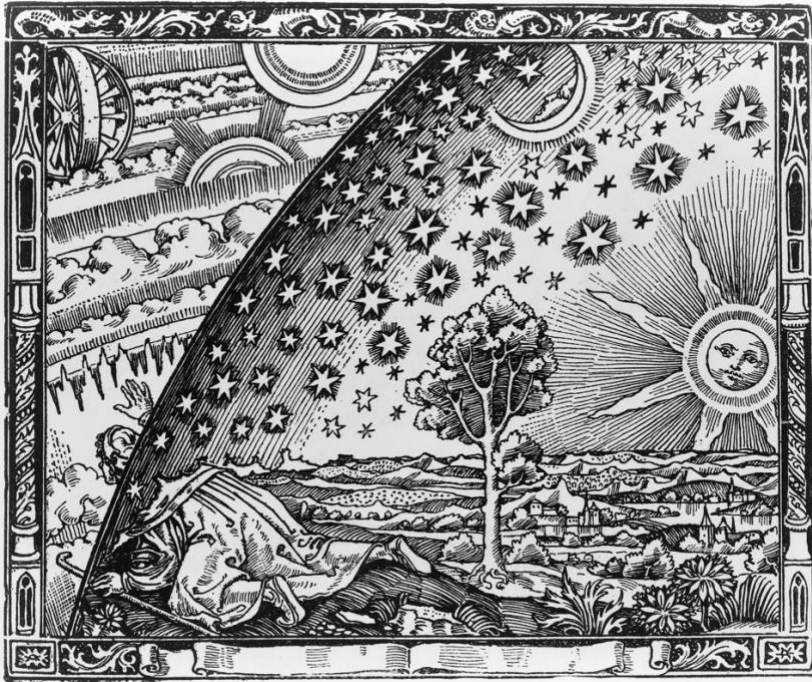


*Cyber Yoga*  
oil and synthetic polymer on canvas  
52.5 x 38.5 in  
2023

Much of Lock's color in these works is made with spray paint, sometimes applied over patterned and textured prints. The paint itself is matt, and sprayed on to the surface, it produces a soft quality, like pure pigment. The non-reflective character of the paint ensures that no reflection diminishes the purity of its color. Lock also tells me that ultramarine blue has a slightly fluorescent character. It absorbs ultraviolet light and transmits some of that energy as blue light. I've failed to find anything about this in the scientific literature on pigments but looking at the intense blues of some of Lock's paintings here, I find it easy to believe. Lock's intense blues also remind me of the intense 'self-luminous' hues that Paul Churchland calls 'chimerical colors', and I wonder if similar effects enhance some of Lock's intense colors.<sup>2</sup> However these intense effects are produced, they have a quality that seems, phosphene-like, somewhat detached from the world of physical objects, emanating from the canvas, encouraging us to acknowledge their existence as pure sensation.

### **Geometry and grids**

If one continues to press or rub one's eyes, one may see grid and mosaic-like geometric patterns. These can also be seen in lucid dreaming, or in response to sensory deprivation, strobing lights or psychedelic drugs. The psychologist Heinrich Klüver identified the various forms that these patterns can take.<sup>3</sup> For those who see them, they can suggest glimpses of otherworldly architecture and decoration. The geometric elements in Lock's works suggest such fragments – pieces of moulded latex patterned with a grid and laid over the canvas, or patterned with a more complex geometry and integrated within the canvas's powdery surface. All suggest structures that extend – invisibly – further, perhaps indefinitely. For me, they recall the glimpse that the traveller in the Flammarion engraving gets of a world of neo-Platonic forms as he lifts the curtain surrounding the mundane world of appearances.



Anonymous, Flammarion engraving, 1888.

### **Techgnostic transmissions**

Geometry and grids are also features of the modern, technological world. They are present in real physical forms, large and small, in concrete, steel and wiring, and in the invisible but no less physical flows and networks of energy and information. For Lock, the geometries and patterning that appear in his works are especially associated with networks of energy and information. Here, Lock's ideas show an affinity with those of Erik Davis, whose 1998 book, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, drew attention to the many parallels underlying thinking around information technology and ancient spiritual ideas. He focused especially on Christian Gnosticism, which put great store in secret knowledge and mystic experience – ideas vividly visualised in the Flammarion engraving. Of course, technology, as ordinarily understood, is a physical phenomenon. But Davis shows that underlying the thinking of many of its most visionary proponents are impulses that have an affinity with strands of early Christianity: a disdain for the body, a fear of death, and a desire for immortality. For Davis's "techgnostic", these impulses drive a desire to become one with technology, and to identify the technological with the spiritual.

How far can we follow such ideas? Some say that we are becoming fused with technology already. For philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers, our minds may already extend beyond our skulls to the technology that we depend on for cognitive processes such as memory, calculation and visualisation.<sup>4</sup> We often "outsource" these activities to technology: social media sites hold our memories, computers enhance our ability to calculate, and CGI and AI aid our ability to visualize. So, much cognition goes on outside our skulls. Thus, for Clark and Chalmers, our minds – which is also to say our selves – may extend beyond our bodies into technology. We may already be cyborgs of a kind: amalgams of flesh, technology and invisible flows of energy and information. Clark and Chalmers's thinking does not go quite so far as Davis's, but their ideas are consistent. As Davis says, "information technology transcends its status as a thing, simply because it allows for the incorporeal encoding and transmission of mind and meaning."<sup>5</sup>



*Space is the Place*  
oil, polyurethane and synthetic polymer on canvas  
57.9 x 70.5 in  
2023

Lock thinks of his works as “technostic transmissions”: transmissions of mind and meaning that hint at the kinds of understandings I have sketched here. His works present the viewer with the non-physical character of color, and suggest a world in which one’s sense of self extends beyond one’s body into abstract, technologized spaces. Look at these works, and something else will be straightaway apparent. They show that these revelations in our understanding of reality, and changes in our sense of self, need not be threatening, but can be affirming, life-enhancing and oceanic in feeling.

– Michael Newall, November 2023

**Michael Newall** is a writer and researcher. From 2004–20 he taught at the University of Kent, Canterbury, where he held roles including Director of the Aesthetics Research Centre and Head of the History of Art department. He has published two books: *What is a Picture?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), and *A Philosophy of the Art School* (Routledge, 2019) which won the Outstanding Monograph Prize from the American Society for Aesthetics. Currently he is researching questions around color, and his recent publications in this area include ‘A Study in Brown’ (*Synthese*, 2023) and ‘Painting with Impossible Colors’ (*Perception*, 2021). He is Co-Director of The Little Machine (thelittlemachine.com @the\_little\_machine), a space for contemporary and experimental art, which he curates with Eleen Deprez.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Jackson, ‘Epiphenomenal Qualia’, *Philosophical Quarterly* 32, 1982: 127–36.

<sup>2</sup> Paul M. Churchland, ‘Chimerical Colors: Some Phenomenological Predictions from Cognitive Neuroscience’, *Philosophical Psychology* 18, 2005: 527–60.

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Klüver, *Mescal and Mechanisms of Hallucinations*, University of Chicago Press, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers, ‘The Extended Mind’, *Analysis* 58, 1998: 7–19.

<sup>5</sup> Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Harmony Books, 1998: 4.