One Artist, One Artwork and Sleepr

Daniel Curtis: Welcome back to ***"One Artist, One Artwork".*** This is the live interview series where I invite one artist to discuss one new piece of their work in depth, fostering slow looking in our hectic digital landscape. Welcome to you. If this is your first time, welcome. If you're a return visitor, what are you doing back here? How did you get into my house to see? No, I'm welcoming you too. And if you don't know me, I'm Dan Curtis. I'm an artist. I'm a writer from London in the UK. And I'm super excited to announce this week's guest who is the enigmatic and legendary digital artist Sleepr. So we're going to be talking about a brand new piece of Sleepr's work that coincides with the opening of his first major solo exhibition in the UK in London, which opens next Friday, at the time recording this, the 24th May and goes through to the 30th May. It's going to be an incredible show. And if you are interested in coming along to the show, if you know Sleepr's work, I'm sure you will be. If you don't, by the end of this episode, I'm sure you'll want to come as well. So if you want to come along, and you would particularly like to come along to the opening night, where there's going to be all sorts of interesting things happening as well, performances and stuff like that, please do drop me a DM on Twitter. You can find my link tree in the description of the YouTube video here, if you're watching on YouTube. And if you're watching on Twitter, then you're already on Twitter, aren't you? So you can just email me there. Not email me, DM me. I'm confusing myself, but I think you know what I mean. So drop me a line and I'll let you know the way you can sign up for tickets to get yourself into the show. So let me bring up the wonderful and enigmatic, Sleepr. Sleepr, how are you? Welcome.

Sleepr: Hey, Dan, thanks so much for having me. I really appreciate it. Really stoked to be here.

Daniel Curtis: An absolute joy. And thanks for making our crazy opposite sides of the world time zones work as well. I appreciate that. So, one week to go till the exhibition. How are you feeling about it? I guess you started making the work and that kind of thing?

Sleepr: I started yesterday. Very, very excited. There's a week until the show now. Lots of moving pieces, but I think it's all going to come together pretty neatly.

Daniel Curtis: Absolutely. I'm super excited and the work's great and I'm really excited to show everyone the new piece from the show as well. But just by way of introduction, if people are not that familiar with your work, it'd be great if you could just talk to us a little bit before we look at this new piece, how

you've ended up making the work that you're making, the process behind it, which is very important for people to understand and let us know.

Sleepr: It's a bit of a long story, but maybe the short version is I've been making work for quite a while. Some of the earlier pieces are posted on Flickr and online in random places from about 2009. So it's about 15 years of digital work. And I started as a young kid just through a lot of experimentation, making stuff. But really the reason why I even tried out was quite a wild story about growing up in Australia. I live in Queensland and Brisbane and there's quite a subculture of psychedelic use, mostly due to the plants and the natural and some of the native plants that are in this location, namely the acacia tree. And it's a very rich in tryptamine and DMT plant. And what has happened is in Australia in the noughties in the 2000s, there was quite a lot of DMT production and kind of use. And as a young kid I was going to parties and experimenting and trying things out. And suddenly I had all these really wild visionary experiences. And I saw all of these really bizarre and complex geometric places and I saw spirit beings and portals and UFO's and all sorts of really wild things that I had no clue of how I was seeing them or where they were coming from and what they meant. And for me, the most intuitive thing to document what was happening to me was through art. It was just a really the most intuitive thing that made sense to try to capture some of the strangeness that I was seeing. And so for me, it actually was like about, they felt more like diary entries growing up. There were little notes that I was scribbling to myself about really peculiar aesthetics and qualities that I was seeing. And later in life I studied and did a masters and then I studied my PhD for a few years and I was focused directly on documenting the complex aesthetics of DMT hallucinations in my PhD. And that tried to bridge this really difficult problem of figuring out what they are and where they're from. And the way I proposed to do that was through art. And it was kind of merging the field of psychology and ophthalmology and vision science along with the visual arts. So it's been a wild story, but it all started from these organic visionary experiences that I had. And they try to capture some of those details of that world.

Daniel Curtis: It's absolutely fascinating journey and quite unique really. And I guess sort of the culture of maybe art based around hallucinogenics is, I would say, a bit marginalized, a bit sidelined, often as being sort of like either not necessarily too out there, but sort of not serious, if you know what I mean, in terms of art study. In terms of that journey, how did you find coming up against that? Maybe it's worth talking a bit about your sort of anonymity even, and how that works.

Sleepr: I think definitely artists are marginalized already, and then even within the art community, you're a real weirdo if you've gone on this kind of poison path, fringe area. But the legitimacy of the

research is where I came at it from, and I understand why it's a hard thing. Particularly if you haven't experienced it, it's just like someone telling you about a dream. It doesn't quite stick. It just kind of sounds like a kooky thing. Even if people are neutral, it's hard for them to really jive and get behind it but it is an illegal thing. And there was a lot of taboo navigating that I had to do in the PhD, and a lot of political kind of management at the university. And then I've been teaching at universities for another maybe ten years or so after that point. And I decided when I stopped doing the research to just make art and actually I'm going to do the research myself and get out of the political red tape and eggshells that felt like it was hindering a more just really truthful approach into exploring and navigating this topic. But at the same time, for me to maybe be more truthful, I've had to hide myself because it's still a really illegal and taboo topic to even talk about. To be pretty frank, it's probably pretty risky in terms of my career, and it's risky in terms of just a bunch of other reasons. So it's actually been easier to just remain pseudo anonymous and to have enough of a mask to just keep a buffer. And at the same time, I actually really believe that through that anonymity, there's more authenticity in the work. The people are just actually looking at the work. And for me, when I was researching, I just want to document it. I don't really care about the artist being a famous artist or that their name is in lights and that's actually not really my main goal. My main goal is actually about a documentation of something that's happening in the world. It's more like an explorer and trying to build these maps of this space. I'm less interested in myself being promoted as a cultural, maybe figurehead or something. But there's layers. Like, even in a mask, you end up a character that's the person behind the work. So I understand there's loads and loads of complexity with anonymity and authenticity.

Daniel Curtis: And do you think then that's why maybe you chose art, let's say above becoming a scientist or a research analyst or writing about the work? Obviously, you do write about your experiences as well, and the catalogue for the show will contain some of your writing, but why not be a writer, if you know what I mean, and just document the experiences as best you can? What was it about making art that has made more sense for you of this? It is a traveling. It's a research project, it's a nomadic project. What is it about making art, particularly, maybe digital art that's important for you in this journey?

Sleepr: There are a lot of limits that happen with language and writing, and that was actually the main focal point, was saying that the visual arts can reach further accuracy than you can with descriptions. So, if I said, I saw this rainbow tunnel, a thousand people will draw a thousand versions of that rainbow tunnel. You could even see it if you use Al now, like Midjourney or something, type in a rainbow tunnel

You could just spin the cycle a thousand times and see a thousand versions of it. So what I need is a very specific and accurate rainbow tunnel with the right width and the right size and the right rotational amount. But there's two layers. Like, visual art is better than verbal descriptions. But then art versus science, a lot of scientific imagery feels very lackluster because it's just trying almost like a camera, capture the truth. And this is where art gets into some really interesting and fuzzy territories about art perhaps bending the truth or amplifying the truth or omitting details to help reveal more truth. And I remember during my bachelor learning a lot about even documentaries and the goal of documenting the truth. And that actually, documentaries are a story, and they're constructed, and they're edited, and there was a way more shots that weren't included. Actually, through that construction, you can maybe, perhaps reach closer. So there's that layer that art helps you construct a clearer picture and feeling sometimes that can't be captured through just visuals. Sometimes I want a foreboding feeling with the room or the space and the forebodingness. The only way to get the feeling of the foreboding is for maybe me to darken the room or to put a brighter spotlight on one area. Even though perhaps that spotlight wasn't in the visual that was the feeling that was happening at that same time. And there are many, many interwoven layers of aesthetic decision making that end up with this final single moment snapshot or feeling that you've had when you see these works that remind you of these spaces. So the lies in art are actually very interestingly, sometimes closer to the truth than what a more truthful snapshot would have got.

Daniel Curtis: That's fascinating. Particularly when you think about documentary and filmmaking, as you say, what you keep in, what you keep out, what story you construct, there's sometimes a thought that to construct a visual image is to select and be selective means that you're being untruthful. But actually, the Curation of imagery, the composition of imagery is what is the key to the impact, isn't it? If you literally just showed everything that was filmed, it might not get that same impact to the viewer as constructing a narrative that they can embed themselves in or something like that. And I've heard great interviews with cinematographers, who say things like. Or they've been questioned like, but where's the light source for this light you're adding in? It doesn't make sense in terms of reality let’s say, but that doesn't matter. The point is what truth it reveals in the shot or draws us closer to. Like you said, even if the actual reality of that light in the scenario wouldn't make sense. That's fascinating. I think that's a good point for us to get into the new piece. So this is the brand new work that's going to be one of the pieces exhibited next week in London. And here it is. This is called ***“The Source of Novelty by Sleepr,”*** a brand new piece. And I'm really excited to be looking in depth at this work for the remainder of our interview. So I want to say if it could have been even any more possible for your work to get more

intricate than it already is. You seem to have crossed into another layer here, which is fascinating to me, but I just love to hear, and I'm sure everyone listening would love to hear about just some of the process really for creating this work. In the show and the way you've created it, it's absolutely huge. We're talking 2 meters by nearly a meter and a half, 240,000 pixels, extremely intricate. I'd love to hear a little bit about the process of this piece in particular and how you arrived here.

Sleepr: Thank you. So this piece was the first one created for the show, and it was after Art Basel, where I'd spent four or five days straight in a little locked up booth making one work. And it kind of pushed the complexity and depth and detail work really high. So it felt like that should be the new standard. But this one, I had this idea in the back of my mind for a long time, maybe five or six years. After going down a study route of morphology and the way that things can bend and morph in 2D animation and traditional, like Max Fleischer cartoons and almost like cup-head style, that real rubber hose animation style, Popeye. And trumpets blaring and mouths opening and cows turning into, it's just the limitless of the imagination. But one of the ideas I had was the things that I've seen in the visions are actually very, very fluid. It's a classic trip description or visual hallucination description is this bendability and morphology and this stretching and fluidity. And I've tried to do that lots of ways through 3d so I can do 3D modeling and I do 2D illustration, and I do all sorts of medium stuff across lots of different mediums. But one way I thought to get that fluidity and bending was I wanted to use kid's toys. So I went to an op shop, like a secondhand store here in Australia. I bought maybe like $100 worth of kids toys, like two giant crates, and had little caterpillars and little choo-choo trains and planes and rubber ducks and red big balls and all sorts of stuff.

Daniel Curtis: Interesting eyes on you from the staff.

Sleepr: I know. I said they were for my little cousin, but there is no cousin. I am the little cousin. And then I bought a heat gun and melted them all together. So played around for an afternoon, lots and lots of plastic, toxic smoke, but that's fine. It was worth the pain. And just played around with how they melted into each other and morphed and twisted them and dropped them. And I just played for a while in trying to capture a lot of really interesting forms and then took them into my little studio and put some really nice lighting on them, put reflective bases down, had little spotlights, tuned them all up different colors, and took a lot of high def photos of all these warped and melted toys that were all bound together and then drew over the top of them and constructed the nice pieces out of them and joined them together into another composition, like in Photoshop, just cutting pieces out, joining them together, and then eventually in vector, illustrator, kind of redrew over the top of a lot of them. So that

helped to get a base of this swirling, twisting, morphing cacophony of stuff. But that then had really clear figurative facial toy, kind of elements poking through. So that was the process. And I'd never done that before. And it's really important to me in all my work that I kind of explore a technique in depth or think about it for a long time and then do it once and then never do it again. So I won't do that again. But that was a really nice process for this piece.

Daniel Curtis: It's interesting sort of how by embedding yourself in this other place, this other world, which we'll talk more about as we go along, of hallucinogenics, then using a physical objects and melting them down and bringing those two sort of things together as a way to, for one thing to speak to the other one world, to speak to the other in a way, or maybe to show that they're not too far apart, is really interesting. So the actual physical process is interesting, but then the sort of conceptual link for me, I think is really cool as well. Maybe that speaks a little bit into the title as well the source of novelty. It seems like that's quite important to the wider experience of the exhibition and that's going to be all about, but particularly to this piece and its process. Could you speak a bit more about the source of novelty and how it came to be titled that?

Sleepr: Sure. So novelty is something I speak about a lot. I probably picked it up mostly from Terence McKenna and his novelty theory and his deep work on DMT. Novelty seems to me to be a really, really, really important area. And I keep returning back to it year after year. And I think research wise, and even for the wider community, novelty is a very, very important topic to be studied really deeply and seriously. Novelty can be replaced with many words as well. It's not a special word. Novelty simply is the description of something new. We use other words like originality. We use other words like creativity or innovation or invention, imagination. All of these things are this process of generating something brand new from old things. And so it's quite easy to see how the brain creates new things. It simply remixes, almost like a DJ. Like, it cuts and twists and morphs and stretches little sound bites and snippets and things that it has seen in the real world and then constructs them together into new combinations. But there is a real magical element that seems to transcend just remixing. And this is really, really delicate, specific, fine-tuned moment where something brand new is birthed. And everything we see around us came from this one moment. We often, as artists, kid ourselves thinking that the imagination is our realm. I think we just do it formally. But everyone uses the imagination, and everything uses the imagination. Cooks use it, chefs use it, architects use it, and mathematicians use it. Everyone uses this process of designing and creating new things. And we actually don't teach it very well at school. We just tell people to go ***"Use your imagination."*** Well, how? What is the actual mechanisms of the

imagination? And what are the neuro mechanisms of the imagination? If I understand those, then I can hack it and actually have extreme novelty. And I think for me, there's levels of newness. If I just tweaked the Mona Lisa with red hair, it wouldn't feel because it's a new thing. No one's seen it before, but it's not very new because there's these bandwidths of like how much novelty there is or how much originality there is? And I'm really interested in having major departures and moving into really new territory. Or I'm even interested in just striving for that even if I can't achieve it. I really want to do that. It's very hard and challenging to leave all your existing frameworks behind and go really deep into novelty. So I want magnitudes 100x novelty rather than just 1x. And so for me, it's like, ***"Oh, this piece is like almost a visualization of it."*** Imagine if in the brain there is the imagination center, and there's just this explosion of a million different ideas and combinations and these streaks of light and these faces all swirling. It's like this is the source of all new things. It's just like a fun play on it, but underneath there's a really serious inquisition. And I think the Meta flip on it is in the same way. This piece is quite novel. It feels like a fresh cool work. So it's also the source of novelty. It's like displaying what novelty really is at the same time as saying this is where we should be headed towards. And that's why there's this little boat on this dark black inky sea, and that that's where we should be heading straight in towards the source of novelty.

Daniel Curtis: That's super helpful. I'm so glad you mentioned the figure and the boat, because that was kind of going to be my next question off the back of that. And a lot of the works for this new exhibition, this one included, have contained more observable figures and figuration. And by that, I mean human figuration. Obviously, in your previous work, there's been a sense of spaces, of architecture, location, but there are figures sort of inserted into some of the works. I'd love for you to speak into that a little bit more. And how you've in earlier work, it was almost pure abstraction, at least to us. You're talking about things that you've seen and under the influence of DMT and maybe we can't even call those abstract. I'm not sure. Maybe that's a bigger discussion. But it'd be interesting. Your insertion of figures into this piece and the rest of the show, what's informed that? Is that about making a statement about novelty, as you said, and let's drive for it? Or is it more about sort of seeing ourselves on a journey? What do you think?

Sleepr: It's a good point. Strangely, I treat each work very intimately. It's got its own personality and it's got its own drive and desire, and almost like they just really naturally wanted to have some figurative elements in them. I think the dynamic that I've swung between has been the abstract works is like, I'm neck deep in these spaces. When you're really deep in a high dose, it's blindingly strange. It's higher

dimensional. It's just impossible geometry. It's impossible imagery to understand. And so the abstract works some way to capture that. But then I've really liked swinging between like a third person perspective where you're almost watching. But the abstract works are very first person, like you're in the work itself, looking from your point of view out. Should I've really loved seeing this stuff in third person, where you're almost seeing the person seeing that work in first person, and yet I kind of like a little bit more distance so that us as the viewer don't feel as dizzyingly lost inside the abstract. It's kind of like I can comfortably relax and understand that dynamic. I get all of the goods, but I actually don't have to be swirling around inside. And even this piece is a good one. Like, with that, where it's seeing the boat rather than seeing this just from the point of view of the person on that boat, which is how I may have, would have done it years ago. Now I kind of seeing these figures moving in towards those swirling shapes of novelty.

Daniel Curtis: Amazing. In a few minutes, I'd love to bring some questions up as we sort of draw towards the end of my questions here in our discussion. If you have a question, please feel free to drop it under the stream. If you're watching on Twitter or on YouTube in the comment section that's next to the video, I will be able to bring them up here. It's worth noting on YouTube that there is a little bit of a limit to the amount of characters you can use. So feel free if you need to sort of use a few things. Don't write a bloody essay. Well, you can write this if you want, but leave that to a later day. Come back to us with that. But if you want to ask a question, feel free to do that. And I can bring it up in a moment. But maybe as a way of rounding up my questions, we kind of touched on it a little bit this idea of interpretation of what you see under these hallucinogenic experiences and how you, as the artist, are needing to shape what you are seeing. I guess my final question is, we've talked about this before in our own conversations outside of this, but an amnesiac nature of these experiences. And I guess over time, as you've described to me before from your earliest experiences with the acacia plant when you were younger, they're almost completely overwhelming. And obviously, you're not a teenager anymore. This is you, as you described to me, putting on jazz music, taking a seat, bringing your notebooks. You're sort of like an explorer jumping into the cave on the rope. But it must be so difficult to hang on to these experiences and these visual narratives and things that you're seeing. What's your experience now with that frustration of not being able to hold on to everything? And then the reality of it, never truly being able to expose that? How do you deal with that frustration now in this work?

Sleepr: That's probably the one thing I would feel very vulnerable and very self-frustrated with. It's the real sore point of being an artist. And I think being myself, I cannot describe to you how far off I am from

what I see. I take these experiences and then I go back, look at my work and I can see a centimeter out of a whole football field. Like, the complexity and the beauty. The sheer gobsmacking beauty is just otherworldly. It's very humbling. And all it does is we just continue to try. I'll have these long, long six hour experiences from midnight till 06:00 a.m. And if I come back with one detail, that's a really good detail that I include in one work that's in one corner, I'm really proud of that achievement. This is hard work. I follow Toly and the Solana Devs and I look at their architectural infrastructure problems and their programming difficulties and the complexity is really, really deep. I read about quantum physics and I read about mathematicians and all these people struggle with really, really complex problems and chip away for years and years and don't get very far, a lot of them but I think that validates the mission. If it was easy, it would be over and there wouldn't really be much fun in it. For me when I was a kid, I remember thinking, I wish I had a mission that was like 100 years long. And then I would be on my deathbed and be like, ***"I solved it in the last moment of dying and it was all worth it."*** Be careful what you wish for.

Daniel Curtis: That's the moral of this episode. That's amazing. Feel free, again, if you have any questions, just to drop them in. But I guess my final question is relating of this piece to the bigger exhibition. The exhibition is called ***"Secrets"***, and we've talked a little bit about novelty, obviously, as you've mentioned, novelty theory, but we've talked sort of outside of this interview about the idea of the circus and how that is bending, warping, otherworldly, saturated environment that's created around us, which is a kind of great way to describe the sort of work you're making as well. It'd be great if you could speak a bit more into the ***"Secrets"*** title, the idea of the show, and your bigger aims for the exhibition as a whole really?

Sleepr: So ***"Secrets"*** is like twelve works, and they deliberately span many different time periods. So they almost start in ancient times and they go archaeological, and then they go to really modern times in suburbia, and then they move into almost futuristic times. So they span all time periods and they span all spatial locations as well. So some are deep in the jungle, some are deep in the desert, some are deep underground, some are deep in hyperspace or these hidden secret, highly reflective geometric rooms. Some are in the mind like this one. And the whole point is that there are many, many secrets. And in fact our whole world is almost built on secrets. It's not like there's just a little secret over there in the corner and everything else is visible. It's almost like reality itself is just this giant mask that covers endless secrets. It's like everywhere you turn, there's secrets.

If you are open and are looking and poking around under the rocks. Most people tend to think that the secrets are really far away or that they don't get to see the secrets or that it didn't touch them. Or it's not here in this bedroom, in this London apartment, or in this Australian house or this park like it is. It really is on that tree over there. It really is underneath that water bottle. It really is on the tip of your finger. They're everywhere. So the goal was try to span a lot of different locations, a lot of different mediums, a lot of different time periods and to talk about the bigger secret which is that there's secrets everywhere rather than just one small one.

Daniel Curtis: Well that's a great way to finish my question. Thank you so much. There's a question here from dude, I'm just going to bring up. I love this question. How many experiences create the framework for developing a single work, if that's consistent or not? I love this question because it seems you mentioned that sort of again, we talked about the frustration and how far away you are in a way from the experiences that you're having. And the 1cm of the football field like you said. Is that 1 cm built up of a lot of experiences or are you trying to replicate each time you go? It kind of creates a new work. I really like this question. Go through it.

Sleepr: It's a great one. I'd say it's both. So some qualities and aesthetics are really consistent over multiple experiences. And then they tend to iron themselves out as a clearer quality to capture. Maybe something like morphology of this bending and stretching of figures that I've seen that in many, many different experiences and then become familiar enough with the qualities of it to then capture the essence of it. Other times it's been a very clear like Polaroid moment that is just burnt into my mind. And I try very hard to capture the Polaroid, that single experience. So it's actually both. I think of my work as basically a tapestry of clues. Some of them are across multiple experiences, some are just a single one that happened.

Daniel Curtis: Love that. Amazing. Well, we're coming to the end of our time here. Sleepr, thank you again for such an amazing interview and for going so deep into your process and sharing this new work with us. And good luck for next week as well.

Sleepr: Thanks, Dan I really appreciate it.

Daniel Curtis: Not at all. Again, artists always seem to thank me a lot for bringing them on, but for me it's just like getting to chat with someone I love for ages. So it's definitely indulgent for me too. If you miss the beginning of this or you want to go back and watch the whole thing, then you can. This will be on my YouTube channel after this. The link is in my bio. If you're watching on Twitter, if you're on

YouTube, you're already in the right place. If you go to playlists on my YouTube channel, you can see every single interview that I've done, and this one with Sleepr is going to be added on. If you also missed the start, you might have missed me saying that this piece is from the ***"Secrets"*** exhibition, which opens next week on Friday and runs through May 24th to 30th. If you want to come along to the show, and particularly if you want to come to the opening night, which is going to be very interesting, full of stuff happening as well as seeing the new work, please just drop me a DM on Twitter and I can put you in contact with the right people for you to get the ***"Secret"*** event bright link. So please do that. Otherwise, that's it. We're coming up perfectly on 45 minutes. So, Sleepr, thank you so much again and safe travels. Your flight is tomorrow to come over, is that correct?

Sleepr: Yeah, that's correct. And thanks so much, Daniel. I can't wait to catch up with you.

Daniel Curtis: Safe travels. And for those who are coming, we'll see you in London next week. And one thing I'll say is that I'm going to be doing a few slow looking tours of the exhibition as well while it's going on during the week, and I'll post about them on Twitter so you can come along too. All right, we'll see you in the next one. There'll be a bit of a break, a couple of weeks while I'm involved in the show with Sleepr as well. So we'll see you again for ***"One Artist, One Artwork"*** back in June. Love you lots, guys.