

# EXTREME

# ACCESS

DARIUS SHAOUL '18 ON ART, TECHNOLOGY, AND

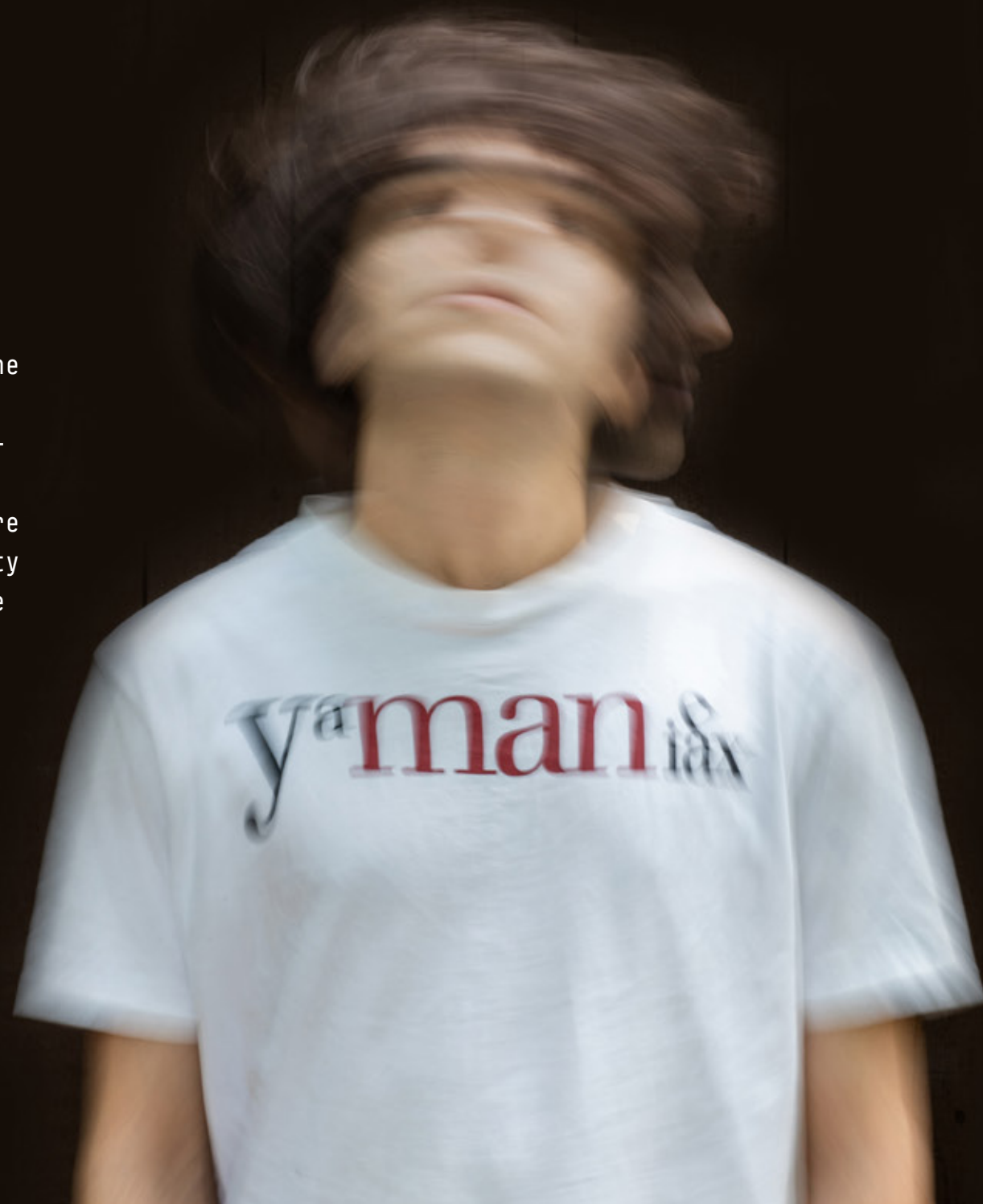
HIS AWARD-WINNING AI FILM

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These scenes build an image of a half-awake mind that has taken on the form, content, and pace of an increasingly stultifying media delivery machine: the Internet is simply more perfect public-access television. The dreams we conjure up to enhance reality become more and more real. At this stage in history we can now make a short film without the need for cameras.

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STORY BY  
DARRY MADDEN  
  
PORTRAITS BY  
LAURA STEWART



The forest that surrounds his family's home in Dummerston is deep and wild.

Darius Shaoul '18 was on break from college last summer, home again in Vermont, amidst the tremendous trees, the art, the instruments, and the creative chaos in the house. He was home again in Vermont, amidst the back-to-the-landers, the craftsmen and artisans, and the counterculture ethos that raised him.

Over the summer, he was also bound for Spain, where his recent AI-generated film (created with collaborator Gabriel McKee), *Extreme Access*, won an award at the first AI film festival in Europe.

The concept for the short film is, says Shaoul, is an experiment in free association with the new—and to many, controversial—technology.

Shaoul, aged 23, comes to this art form from an interesting vantage point, and he brings to it a philosophical take beyond, it seems, a college student.

"This technology can be celebrated or detested. But it's important to remember that it's just one of many technologies—it doesn't stand apart from other technologies in the past," said Shaoul. "I think that it creates this response in people means that it has the potential for changing minds and opening the understanding of technology's relationship to our own efforts as humans."

The film he made opens on barren landscapes of caves, featuring billboards of barren landscapes of caves. Barren landscape upon barren landscape: a stark beginning-of-time feeling reflecting on itself. It moves through the mundane (commuters on trains scrolling endlessly) to the religious (cardinals at a photoshoot), and the profane (AI's version of an orgy), to the sacred (a mother birthing a baby in a green meadow).

He describes the process of prompting the software and engaging with its feedback as "dreamlike," which is an odd word for a topic for which others might use "dystopian."

The description that accompanies the film reads: *After waking from a dream, it is often difficult to tell how you managed to get from one moment to the next, yet you feel as if there was an urgent moral that tied it all together, a moral that was grasped the very moment you woke up but can no longer be resurrected. Extreme Access has taken the form of*



Darius Shaoul '18 at his family's home in Dummerston, Vermont.

*this dream, a collective dream that is reproduced in the unconscious technologies we use. Rather than take a stance on this seemingly autonomous technology, we hope the viewer will join us in experiencing it as a product of our humanity.*

Shaoul, a musician, started his college career studying anthropology and computer science at UVM. During Covid, he found himself at a fork in the road—buckle down on a career path or follow his impulses to make and study art. He transferred to The School of the Art Institute of Chicago—new city, new trajectory, new medium.

Although, he says, "I think about Vermont all the time."

"I think specifically about the old hippies, the ones who moved here in the '60s and '70s, who experienced the counterculture and back-to-the-land movements. I think a lot of my interests might be a reaction to that, but I also really resonate with the spirit of the people who live in Vermont—the DIY, and setting a path outside of the mainstream institutions."

Art, he points out, has adapted throughout history alongside technology despite art's resistance. At the same time, he observes, art and technology occupy the same space as humanity's highest achievements. "And yet," he said, "They are in constant opposition. Why is that?"

Technology divides the art world, and for Shaoul, they naturally move together. "You can't really try to oppose them in any way. The question is whether or not you can see both of them as the product of human intellect."