

JEFF DION

Signals II, 2016
Oil on Canvas, 42 x 60 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JOHN BLADES

The Remote

I waited until Allison was asleep before slipping out of the house to the electronics superstore. She's in her eighth month now, and she's been going to bed early, well before nine o'clock. That left me a good hour to shop before the store closed. For her sake as well as mine, I had to be secretive. She'd barely recovered from the shock of being pregnant again, and now she had to get used to the fact that in addition to disposable diapers, wipes, pacifiers, monitors, and other basics, we'd need a new smart remote for the baby.

It was an ideal hour to shop. The store's aisles were abandoned, and the few remaining customers were clustered at the checkout stations, their carts piled with boxes and bulging plastic packages. In the metallic yellow light, they looked like a small army of male androids, waiting to have their depleted batteries recharged.

I went straight to the accessories boutique. There was not a soul around except for a boy of seven or so. He was sitting on a sofa in a simulated entertainment center, transfixed by a cartoon show that stretched across a curved LED screen. For a moment, I thought the boy might be a mannequin, part of a floor display, but then I saw him blink, squirm, and twist his head. I was afraid he'd been left behind by a forgetful shopper.

Even though I had plenty of time and there were few customers, I was still seized by the urgency and panic I always felt in the store. The flashes and rumbles coming from the banks and stacks of TV sets and speakers converged into a mainline assault on my eyes and ears. I needed a few moments to compose myself, to relieve a little of the pressure and indecision that came with finding the right smart remote for Allison's pregnancy.

As I'd learned the hard way from our previous negotiations about technological necessities, timing was crucial. I had to catch Allison in a vulnerable moment before bringing it up. My opportunity came one night after dinner. The kids were in their rooms, and she was in the great room, compiling her wish list for a baby shower on the tablet.

But her reaction was what I'd expected. "Not another remote," she said. "Not another electronic device of any kind in this house. You promised after Martin was born that that would absolutely be the last we'd ever need."

"I assumed Martin was going to be our last child," I said. "But that was three years ago, and now it's obsolete."