

Digital Painting, Some Opinions

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Abstract

This will be an illustrated presentation. It will show how digital techniques give the painter both new opportunities and a fresh set of problems. Is this part of the New Media story, or just painting turning a corner?

After a few years attending conferences I knew more or less what I would find at an exhibition of digital art - at Siggraph, at ISEA, or similar events. The prime spots would be given over for innovatory projects that demonstrated amazing technical breakthroughs - the immersive experience of Virtual Reality, interactive art. The corridors and foyers would be given over to 'flat art', framed works, prints or paintings that were digitally produced. The flat art might be of high quality, but as a category it was no competition for the curtained off areas with video projection, high quality audio, and the thrills of VR. This was fair enough. If you're visiting a computer fair and have limited time you join the queues.

You also fall into the way of thinking that says 'cutting-edge' technology plus art must make an irresistible fusion - the artist's vision streamed into a high tech delivery system. Good-bye paint and canvas, pencil and paper. Now it will be a turbo intake system. This way high-tech art has to be cutting-edge too. It is so fast and intense it must be sending reverberations round the art centres of the world. That was the theory.

Five years ago impassioned papers were given at conferences announcing a new and wired human consciousness spearheaded by 'new media' art, an art of phosphorescent images circling the globe, burning across the internet. Old art would be supplanted by new art, it was as simple as that. The defining factor would be the electronic medium. Even the sceptics - who still looked at Rembrandt and who didn't believe everything they read in Wired - agreed that somehow or other a different 'technological' kind of art would emerge.

This hasn't happened. The wider world of contemporary art - museums, magazines, and most of all the legions of artists - has not been overwhelmed by the revolution. In fact it has generally been unimpressed.

Artists using digital media frequently complain of their treatment by critics, but it shouldn't really come as a surprise. From the outset 'computer art' was given a bad name because it was identified through a technique, and because it was aesthetically naive. It failed to distinguish between art proper and a repertoire of effects, optical trickery, illusions, fantasies with metallic surfaces, or more recently the tagged on themes of cloning, surveillance, and the perils of science. Understandably, it has the reputation of a pseudo-art form.

This may not be fair. There is not just one collective enterprise called new media art, but dozens of schools of thought. You could also say that mainstream art has preferred the primitive and the magical, has preferred astrology to astronomy - think of Joseph Beuys - has been incapable of embracing the technological. But whatever prejudices are in play, they determine the way digital art is perceived when it is seen as a single category. For those of us who straddle the divide between new and old media this is particularly frustrating. I have a painting studio and a small space which is my digital studio. I have both a regular camera and a digital camera. I use both to take 'photographs'. I use both physical and digital paint to make images. If I want to represent a river I may draw it, photograph it, paint it. I will probably play with the contrasts like a composer would juxtapose brass against strings and against electronic. I would prefer to exhibit paintings and digital work alongside each other. It is the interaction between the two that fascinates me. But the hand-made looks out of place at a computer show, and the digitally produced looks out of place in a regular gallery. There is an invisible barrier, a barrier of taste, of aesthetic protocol.

When digital art was in its infancy, a spin-off from research labs, a curiosity, it needed its special status. But now it has moved and spread way beyond the confining definitions implied by the phrase 'computer generated'. We should stop treating it as novelty art. In fact I see signs that the barriers are breaking down, but not in the way the prophets of the new millennium art form expected. Artists who haven't used computers at all up to now, who have been dismissive, still know a good thing when they see it. They quietly get on board, and skim off the best ideas that have risen to the surface during all those years of experiment. I have noticed several installations first presented at ISEA some years back emerge once more, but re-engineered by other artists with a few twists to give them greater art world sophistication. On a recent trip to New York I reckoned 20% of the gallery shows I saw involved digitally manipulated photos, interactive displays, projected video, or the internet. The big difference is now there is no fuss made about it being 'digital'.

I am indulging in some sweeping generalisations because I have felt less than committed to the manifesto of New Media - what some teasingly call the 'electronically correct' view, with its imperatives of consumer-choice interaction, consciousness-massaging new age spiritualism. In that context it was not ambitious to persist with painting - it was conservative, going backwards. It was persisting with the material where we should all be on the road to the dematerialised. But if it becomes clear that it has been wrong-headed all along to expect the new technology to deliver this completely new kind of immaterial art, then several books will need to be rewritten. In other words, we are seeing the end of 'digital propaganda' as an art form. What are we left with? Is there really a deep-level distinction to be made between the digital and the non-digital? I think not.

Last summer there were four of us, each artist from a different country - USA, Canada, Germany, England - talking over these questions at a table outside the conference centre during Siggraph 98 in Florida. We were all practitioners in the 2D category and we all had work on show. We were thinking aloud about whether our efforts amounted to building a bridge for others to cross, a bridge that a later generation would take for granted.

It would mean our work fading into the background once the routes were clear. One element in this is simply the short life-span of hardware and software - some of the pioneer CD-Roms made by artists just a few years back are not only now so slow as to be unplayable, but the CD itself is probably on the way out as a delivery system. If you adhere to the conventions of painting, photography, or the artist's

print, you may - ironically - have longevity on your side. You may be working in a medium 'of the future'. Once complete all you need is a wall and some sunlight.

A further question came up. Crossing from one realm to the other has enormous advantages. There may be few tracks to follow, but this means that you can be free of the self-consciousness of the painter, where every painting you do recalls another painting. In art schools we tend to teach - consciously or unconsciously - by suggesting models and styles for the students to imitate. With computer graphics the models don't exist, so you have to work from your own points of departure. You make your own discoveries, make your own principles - many examples of these, incidentally, are clearly presented in Anne Morgan Splatter's important book 'The Computer in the Visual Arts'^{*}. It is striking how such a book seems packed with useful information, whereas commentary on contemporary art has much more about attitude, style and fashion - as if there is nothing left to be discovered, as if the principal 'issue' in painting is whether painting is so exhausted as a medium it survives only on infusions of irony and extreme imagery. In my own case after digital work I find I return to 'physical' painting with the innocence of a wide-eyed child, with the belief that images can actually be 'created', that they might be more than pale reflections of what has already passed through the art magazines.

An illusion perhaps, but one I am keen to maintain. A student recently asked the eminent US painter Frank Stella - who had talked of defying gravity, and had shown slides of baroque painting - whether he wanted art to be uplifting. Why not? was his reply.

^{*} The Computer in the Visual Arts, by Anne Morgan Splatter, Addison Wesley 1998.

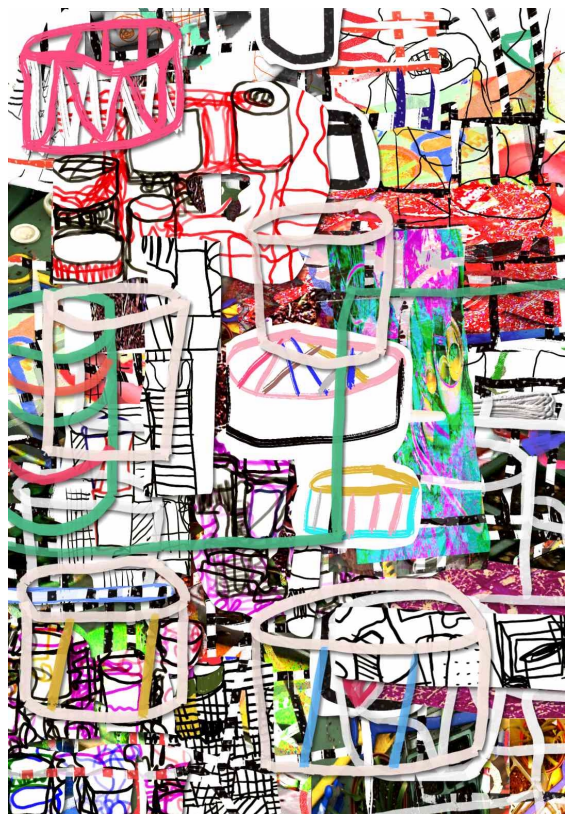


Fig. 1 - Colour and Drawing: from a Garden Table,
1998 composite inkjet print 80 x 56 cms