Design or art? Art or design?

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Exploring the similarities and the differences between artists and designers

New technology has led to similarities in the work created by fine artists and designers who use computers. In the UK, design is still looked down upon in terms of its content and some artists who are commercially successful are denigrated for pandering to market forces. Despite the blurring of the boundaries between fine art and design,

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The Colville Place Gallery opened in May 1997 to provide a venue for showcasing the exciting work being created by artists and designers using computers. We believed that it was time that the boundary between the 'artist' and the 'designer' was forgotten.

'There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is an exalted craftsman . . . Let us therefore create a new guild of craftsmen without the class-distinctions that raise and arrogant barrier between craftman and artist', so wrote Walter Gropius in April 1919 in his manifesto for the Bauhaus, the art movement at the begining of this century.

It is therefore strange to find, that at the end of the century, within the field of Fine Art and Graphic Design, that there is still so deep a division in people's minds between the work of artists and designers, particularly when they use common tools, such as computers. In many cases, their work is indistinguishable in technique. In each area, we find work of such vibrancy and uniqueness that the question of what constitutes 'design' and what can be considered 'art' has little or no meaning.

The Colville Place Gallery looks for work that is visually exciting, with strong emotional content, that is technically superb – where the computer has not just been used to apply a filter or a technique, but where the computer is fundamental to the work, where the computer has expanded the original idea, where the computer has extended the scope of the artist.

Many artists and designers we show, have come from traditional painting and design backgrounds, many have worked purely on computer. Each is different but yet share this common theme. But they have always co-existed uneasily, each wary of being seen to produce work that is broadly similar in technique if not in content.

In the last twelve years that affordable computers and high-specification programmes have emerged. Since the beginning the early Apple Macintoshes have been a tool for pushing the boundary of digital creativity to establish a new visual language in graphic design.

Whilst artists have sometimes explored algorithms and programming to create, mathematically, pictures of immense complexity.

It is only in the last few years that printers have been capable of reproducing this work in colour onto materials and at a size that the artist could be happy with,. Like computers they will continue to improve out of all recognition.

Designers have moved away from commission based work, to an individual or group style for which they have become renowned.

Artists have begun to work commercially, they need to understand 'market forces' and to use them to their own advantage such as the recent autobiographical book by 'Damien Hirst'

Designers such as WHY NOT ASSOCIATES were early adopters of computers and have been instrumental in creating a new language for visual communication – composition, typography, colour and visual mayhem. The level of creativity and invention to which they have aspired was originally seen as extreme and confusing but now is a common part of visual communication, which many have copied.


Newer creative groups such as high-profile digital alchemists THE ATTIK have played a large part in broadening this style and developing this complexity through their commercial work and their own publishing projects, such as the series of books called 'Noise'.

Other works are by imaging specialists RD2 and DEEP DESIGN, who have adapted their ommercial work to work for inclusion in a gallery setting.

Somewhere between these design groups and fine artists rest people like MARTIN GARDINER who remain working daily on commercial projects, yet produces work which explores the possible structures of sub-atomic forms known as radiolaria. Each one cleverly modelled from scratch in 3d and painted before being outputted as highly renedered prints.
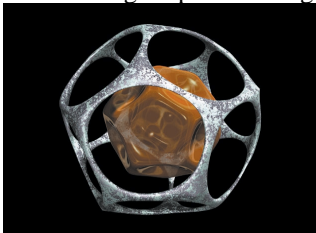
We often find parallells with traditional artists who choose to work on computers as well as working in more traditional media. In these cases, it is not unusual to find them using similar techniques – creating the effect of a soft pencil on rough paper for example. Painter and printmaker PAUL CLIFFORD creates work of a similar level of complexity but creates pieces that are painterly and seemingly traditional.


When we have exhibited works like this, visitors have no problems understanding them. The visual language of the pencil, the engraving and the paintbrush. The content and technique is very similar to the works we have seen earlier – the only difference is the filter of familiarity conferred by the visual elements used.

JAMES FAURE WALKER is a painter who has been using computers for over ten years. Using the computer screen like a canvas, his computer works are similar in scale and technique to his earlier painted pieces. James Faure Walker's work has been exhibited throughout the world – it appears in the permanent collection of one the UK's, and the worlds, leading print collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum and is regularly featured in art magazines and periodicals. Last year he won the ComputerKunst Golden Plotter Award in Germany, and regularly shows at Siggraph. His work is concerned with his immediate environment, a splash of water, a woman passing. Using a digital camera James manages to capture the 'passing moment' and transfer it to his 'virtual canvas' quickly and spontaneously.

ANDREW GREAVES, a sculptor, photographer and installation artist, decided to go back to some of his highly polished fibre-glass sculptures from the late 1970's and rework them for the modern day. Minimal in nature, their rich forms suggesting rolls of printed linen or wallpapers, his works are to him still sculptures, but seen from only one orientation, as prints. Yet the lighting and spatial awareness has been improved from what was possible in the 70's in a gallery setting.
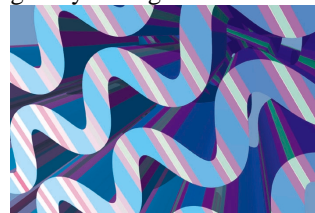

JOAN TRUCKENBROD Uses a vivid palette of vibrant colours. Experimenting with ink technology, she fuses natural forms with fluid shapes to create works that address the tension between nature and the demands of contemporary society.

The early screenprint work of SUE GOLLIFER derives imagery from a complex mathematical series, and although echoes of this remain in her computer works the images have softened and become less austere – she uses technology to create works that appear hand-made and spontaneous – developing an enduring fascination with surface and appearance. The intention is to provide an arena in which the eye can be stimulated and pleased, while the mind can exercise its right to pursue or to reject the illusions offered or withheld.

Moving back again to the boundary between art and design, architect ROBERT COHENS's work deals with grids and colours to present a highly complex view of the process of composition and space. His works are a response to the need for modern imagery in domestic and office environments and imposing order to cluttered environments.
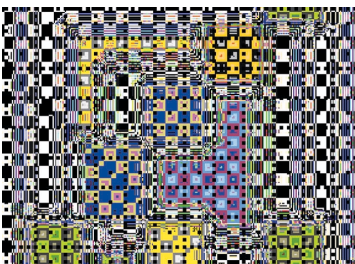
Taking this to a more extreme level, abstraction is reflected in these works by imaging specialists ACROBATIX, whose pieces shown here were produced as site-specific works for a new office development. Working with the notion of architect's plans, motion and signage, these works have an energy and dynamism that is unusual, whilst the use of colour and composition takes these pieces away from the commercial world towards the abstract.
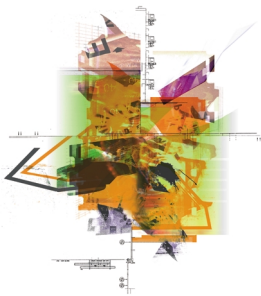

Taking a more intellectual commentary position, here is work from a Catalan avant-garde artist GUILLEM RAMOS-POQUî. He uses the computer as a medium for creating photomontages rich in allegorical meaning. His recent series of work – the

Hermeneutical Maze – sets out to debunk the key claims of postmodernism as applied to the visual arts. These pieces, which are simple in construction, yet academically complex place content as the key part of their presentation.

Conversely here artist JAC DEPCZYK plays with the notion of simple imagery applied to simple ideas to create a directness of approach that has traditions stretching back from the Agitprop posters of the 1960 and 1970s to graphic propoganda from the beginning of this century.
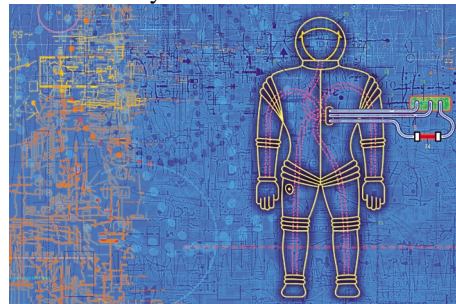
Many artists and designers work in a different field but create prints, such as JENNIE BOULTER whose work is created within a virtual reality environment. From this she can create an interactive fly-through of the created environment, a video or more importantly a series of prints on canvas's which are framed and hung traditionally. Her work is concerned with four-poster beds and poetry, which she dreamed of while convalescing after an accident.
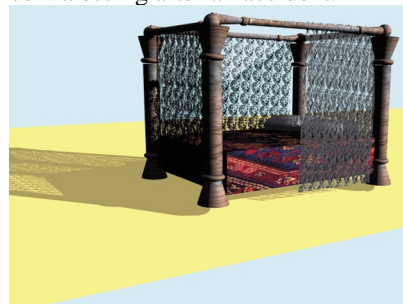
With new technology becoming cheaper, film and video making can also now be attempted by designers and artists on desktop computers. The recent featival at the ICA, London called 'onedotzero 3' reviewed innovative moving image works by artists and designers.

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, diversity of ideas, techniques and skills lead us to explore the world and the universe in a multitude of ways. Yet the same arguments between artists and designers & the same responses from the audience towards digital art are still evident now that were raging a century ago, with the introduction of photography.