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Freedom and Constraint

1.

'Digital fine art' is a confusing term in my case, because I cannot see that painting becomes a different creature just because it is wholly or partially digitised. In other words painting remains painting, whether pre-digital, digital, or post-digital, and the 'creative process' with all its blocks, diversions, anxieties and releases is much the same. Except that you are more likely to be sitting down than pacing about in a studio, I can't see a different pattern to the stress. On the micro scale of pictorial elements there is the difference that you can be 'free' with geometry and constrained forms. But if I paint a red circle on a blue ground it really is not critical whether I use Illustrator, Painter or oil paint, or all three. I could make it 'constrained' using a compass, or make it a bit off, drawing it freehand. The trick is probably doing it so you don't think about how it has been done. That was just as true before anyone thought of a frame buffer.

The more interesting questions are to do with the whys and wherefores of making the circle in the first place. Some might say that painting, as a format for digital invention, is too 'media thin' to compete with an immersive/multimedia/consciousness-bending CAVE set-up. I have heard such set-ups described as 'delivering' an aesthetic experience, or even *the* aesthetic experience. (Wittgenstein once asked whether this sensation could be delivered by an injection, but he was joking.) You could say painting doesn't merit 'cutting-edge' attention, or research funding, as a delivery system. And yes, the position statements, the array of projectors, the fat tomes from MIT, Leonardo, the powerhouse set-up of ZKM, are all impressive. But the content? Have I ever felt liberated, danced or burst into song, tears or laughter, after such experiences? No. But I confess to have done all that after seeing incredible paintings.

I have not yet been convinced that any piece of digital art - algorithmic, interactive, virtual, web - is inherently superior as art just *because* it is digital; nor that it plays more directly on my consciousness or seriously advances art. When I have been impressed it is because of its characteristics as art, not because of its digital aheadness. At computer shows (I am a Siggraph regular) the hardware, the 'emerging technology' steals that prize. 'Digital art' as a category dissolves when 90% of art students are PhotoShop users. We have to move beyond the 'New Media Replace Old Media' fantasies of the nineties. During the period that new media art has been churning out its bloated position statements 90% of the most striking new art has found its inspiration elsewhere. To speculate about the digital and the creative process - is there just one process by the way? - it is wise to keep track of the less openly 'digital'. Perhaps the best digital art won't look digital at all.

2.

For some years I harboured these misgivings about the critical reception - or non-reception - of what was variously called computer art, digital art, or new media art. As a 'digital painter', or someone who each day crossed the line between digital and non-digital by 'continuing' to use physical paint, I was particularly sensitive to the much repeated claim that with the computer behind us we could now go 'beyond' painting, beyond the static and fixed art form to a new universe of interactivity and fluid immersion. Yes, if that were the case, it might be reasonable to talk of a new consciousness, but perhaps only in the terms of hallucinatory stimulants like LSD whose effects are temporary. But these claims never held up - my consciousness remained unaltered. In any challenge between this supposedly new species of art and what was on at the mainstream biennale, or in the museum, it was *nul pointes* for the digerati. My reservations were not so much directed against the futuristic dreams presented at the ISEA conferences - I actually participated in all of these between 1990 and 2002 - but at the cursory dismissal of 'art as it is'.

In 1995 I attempted to put together an ambitious exhibition of digital art, and in the process became all too aware of the theme park culture that actually preferred its 'art' to be big on effect and light on substance. I recounted my experience of this failure in an article in Wired, and soon after found myself with a regular column in CGI, a 'high-end' computer graphics magazine. Gradually the idea of writing a book took shape in my mind. It would be a book that was enthusiastic about the marvels of digital paint, but challenged the

assumption that digital meant different. It would be a book about painting, written from a painter's point of view.

Ten years on the book is written. 'Painting the Digital River' should be published in the winter of 2005/6. It tells of learning to paint with the computer; of misunderstandings across the art and science divide; of the limitations of software; of conversations between the mainstream art world and the digital art world; of emerging genres of digital painting; of the medieval digital; of a different role for drawing. If I had not written this, sooner or later someone else would have done so, simply because attitudes towards 'the digital' have changed so much in the last ten years. The 'web' is no longer an exotic novelty, and artists can no longer feel a little 'avant-garde' if they have a Mac in their studio. The division between the so-called mainstream and the digital underground no longer exists. And after 2000 'art' did not 'go digital' after all, at least not as the pundits predicted. Our laptops are now searingly fast, and printers, projectors, cameras are now of a quality and at a price that would have seemed incredible ten years ago. All this we take for granted. Whatever else there is to say about creativity, about freedom, about constraints, this hum of super-slick technology is in the background.

3.

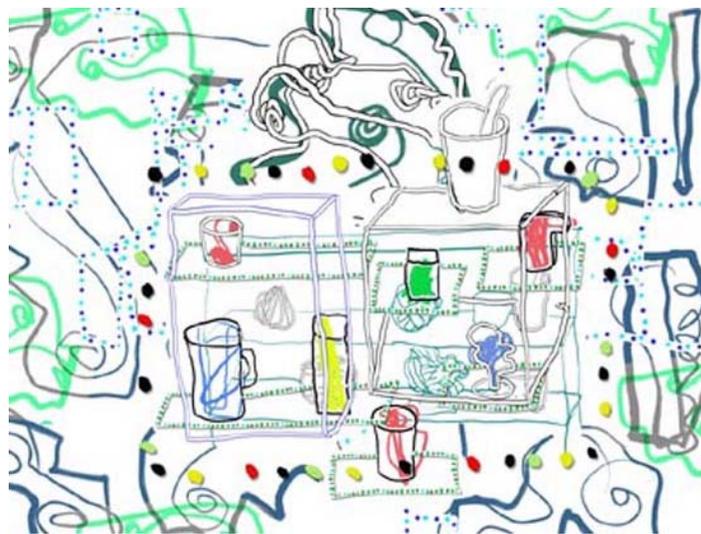
Painting and writing, it can be awkward. How to present your own work? Like other painters who have written, or worked as critics, I have had periods of ten years when I have hardly written a thing. You can argue that it is better to exhibit paintings, or computer pieces, without any position statements, clues to interpretation, and let the work 'speak for itself'. If you believe that art is primarily visual this is quite consistent, although you have to bank on an audience that thinks the same way as you do about 'being visual'. As I have indicated, the reason I felt it necessary to write a book was not so much about digital art being visual as about it being visible. Put simply, it had such low prestige that for many years it was not possible to get it shown in a proper gallery.

All the same, I would hope that the works I show could be seen in their own right, and not as illustrating some thesis about the pros and cons of digital processing. If I had a thesis in my book it was one that said the problems of making convincing art are not shifted this way or that by a change of technology. Painting is still hard work, takes a lot of time, and needs constant practice if you want to get anywhere. Drawing is an interesting case, because while some tasks can be successfully 'automated' in a drawing program, such as perspective, grids, geometry, 3D objects and so on, consensus about what amounts to a 'good drawing' is as elusive as ever. From dogmatic life drawing classes to experimental workshops everyone agrees that drawing is fundamental, and most practitioners now agree that computers have a role to play. But ask how drawing should be taught – from direct observation, through learning programs, through experimental mark-making, through taking photos, studying the old masters, cartooning – and you will end up confused.

This lack of definition has some benefits. In my case I have a routine of making at least one large drawing a day – on paper – but also have sketchbooks and what – through using a Wacom tablet – could be safely termed a digital drawing routine. In other words, by literally 'practising' drawing I here and there churn up a new idea or motif, or record something seen, and at the same time move easily between digital and physical methods. As I photograph the daily drawings, or print the digital ones, I do not think of the contrast between a brush and a digital pen as an unbridgeable divide. If I am interested in a 'J' form I forget about it entirely.



Ideas and Music: Swan. Oil on canvas



Baroque Thoughts for a Rainy Day. Archival Inkjet

In giving talks where I have shown paintings I usually show some of the methods I use to bridge this gap, methods such as laboriously cut stencils, the use of a projector, reduction of a photo to two or three colours. I have done this because 'digital painting' is a confusing concept: it is hard to explain, that yes, this image is entirely painted, oil on canvas, or no, this image is entirely made through a paint program. This probably gives the impression that in making such pieces an artist is exclusively concerned with tricky technical processes. I have tried to balance this by showing examples of medieval and renaissance painting, which have been artfully 'constructed' in ways that echo what is now possible, but this may also give out the wrong signal. The only two articles I have contributed to art magazines in the last two years have been to 'Artists and Illustrators', a how-to magazine aimed largely at the leisure painter looking for short-cuts.

I may hope that my pictures would be seen as more than technical exercises, but I am still uneasy about attaching interpretations, or the 'statement' that still remains obligatory at shows such as the Siggraph Art Gallery. Saying that I hope the pictures one way or another engage the occasional viewer through the rhythm of the drawing, the colour, the light, the contrast, or conflict between image and texture, all this is does not seem to be saying anything very much. But in terms of 'freedom and constraint' and whatever sections of the brain float away in reveries before paintings, it probably is saying enough.