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Flexibility after Destined Death

This paper developed out of my attraction to painting-digital hybrids and my frustration with antiquated structures inhospitable to media flexibility. I've organized the paper in that order – first, as a survey of best practices, followed by thoughts on structures that allow innovative experimentation with traditional and digital media to thrive.

Now that digital tools are ubiquitous, contemporary artists use them at all stages of development. Ideas might be researched on the internet, sketched with pencil, scanned into the computer, manipulated, transferred to canvas, painted, recaptured with a camera, manipulated again, projected again, revised and perhaps resolved. This is nothing new. Cave men incorporated new tools into the practice of painting. What's changed, gradually over time and now at a fevered pitch, is emerging technologies' effect on the speed of progress, both within a painter's practice and the medium's history. What's also changed is the influence of digital media on painting decisions.

Although some painters prefer distance between the computer and their studio, others use computers to impact paintings in subtle to profound ways. As these digitally-influenced paintings make their way into the market and influence painting's history, identifiable trends emerge. At a 2007 symposium called *Painting as a New Medium*, Barry Schwabsky described a mass of paintings being produced under a "new-image-regime" in which "images are not what need to be cleared away in order to see other things more clearly, but on the contrary, they are precisely what need to be seen more clearly." [1]. The symposium roundtable also emphasized the ease with which contemporary painters drift between figuration and abstraction. Digital tools help cultivate this tendency. Artists like Chris Finley, for example, find images online, manipulate them on the computer, and paint them on canvas. As the images move in and out of virtual space, meaning and forms distill and often dissolve.

Sometimes the manipulation stops one level down. Here we witness the proliferation of flat painting in artists like Sarah Morris, Kevin Appel, Ryan McGuinness, and Brian Alfred. This documentary shows part of Brian's process. Since his fellowship at Eyebeam, Brian makes animations and paintings. Just as many early video artists started as painters, many animators develop out of drawing and painting. Contrasted with the slick products of Hollywood, painters-turned-animators often incorporate traditional techniques and offer painterly approach to form and color. In 2007 at the San Diego Museum of Art, Betti-Sue Hertz curated a thorough survey of what some artists describe as motion paintings. Offering diverse approaches to the crossover, the exhibitions included artists who take "advantage of

animation concepts and technologies” while being “persistent in their use of pictorial codes associated with historically grounded painting and drawing traditions” [2]. Highlights include Barnstormers, Jeremy Blake, Kota Ezawa, William Kentridge and Robin Rhode.

Other digitally-savvy painters complicate forms with code, either through existing software or written from scratch. Think here of Matthew Ritchie and Julie Mehretu. Their imagery connects to artists working with code, people like Casey Reas, Joshua Davis, James Patterson, and Evan Roth. These artists harness the power of code to create increasingly complex forms. Books like *Flash Math Creativity* and open-source software like Processing made code suddenly seem accessible to more people [3]. In his 2004 book *Hackers & Painters*, programmer Paul Graham made convincing connections between programmers and painters. Programmers produce lines of broken code, revisit and revise; painters sketch ideas, revisit and revise. Programmers love the immediacy of code; painters praise the same of paint. Programmers see sublime beauty in the power of code; painters also seek the sublime [4].

My own artwork revels in the space between traditional and digital media. Last year, I created an animation for dancer Nora Chipaumire in which I scanned in painting palettes normally discarded and moved the viewer through holes in the palettes to eventually bring them to Zimbabwe, the psychological reference for Nora’s choreography. This year, I developed *The Sherwin Series*, a group of prints, paintings and animations that remixes Sherwin Williams 2007 color forecasts with the architectural structures of 2010 foreclosed homes. My process involved research on Google maps, image manipulation in Flash, and output to final forms.

Just as figure-abstraction hybrids offer refreshing results, so painting-digital hybrids break new ground. When working between traditional and digital media, the liminal space of that practice can be uncomfortably ambiguous and disorienting. Sometimes these moments of discomfort open normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior. This state often cultivates fresh insights manifested in memorable forms.

In a transitional age, when arts practices acclimate to flexible media categories that mimic the messiness of life, how can foundations and academic institutions offer programs that allow artists to specialize when they need to but also have flexibility when they are inspired? Only through debates among open-minded colleagues will we develop the supportive, semi-permeable structures that would foster another cultural renaissance.

References

- [1] Schwabsky, Barry (2006/07): GI symposium: Painting as a New Medium [Online]. Art & Research. Volume 1. No.1. Winter 2006/07. Retrieved from: <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n1/schwabsky.html> [Accessed 28 May 2010].
- [2] Hertz, Betti-Sue, Suzanne Buchan, and Lev Manovich (2009) *Animated Painting*, San Diego, CA: San Diego Museum of Art, 18.
- [3] Peters, Keith, Manny Tan and Jamie MacDonald (2004) *Flash Math Creativity*, Second Edition, New York: Friends of ED.
- [4] Graham, Paul (2004) *Hackers & Painters*, Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly Media, Inc, 18-33.