Digital Stepping Stones & Boundary Changes in San Diego by Joe Nalven

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All of a sudden is not really all of a sudden in technology change--although it seems so when there is a boundary shift, especially as that boundary is mapped out in precious floor space. This commentary is about one small shift in the broad landscape of boundaries in categorizing photocentric media used in making imagery and how that is reflected in the housing of art at the County fair. [When that moment arises in mid June 2007, this article will be updated to show the way in which the floor space has been changed in this exhibit space.]

The boundary change is taking place at the San Diego County Fair where, for several years, the photography exhibit was housed in one large room and eArts (or digital art or computer-based art) was cramped into a smaller adjacent room. That was understandable with the decades long history of the photography showcase while eArts was just emerging.

However, with the retirement of the director, Donna Cosentino--well-schooled in photographic media--comes a director with a new mindset. Stephen Burns leads the San Diego Photoshop Users Group with over 2300 members and has written several books on Photoshop as well as having taught photography. Now the lines will be drawn differently: both photography and digital arts (formerly eArts) will share the same large room. This is not to say anything about the goodness of the submissions past or those to come, but simply to note that there has been a transformation in the visual media landscape. (Worth noting: the terrain on the first floor of this San Diego County Fair building is still guarded by the non-photographic and the non-digital media visual arts--although elsewhere in San Diego, all static visual art is judged on an equal footing such as at the San Diego Art Institute.)

History of the San Diego Photoshop Users Group

The San Diego Photoshop Users Group [SDPUG] was one of many new computer-related users groups that emerged in the 1990s. SDPUG began in 1997 with its first meeting in a building belonging to the photography club in San Diego's major park--Balboa Park, aptly called the Photographic Arts Building. This was about the time that Photoshop 4 was being introduced. Shortly, the SDPUG moved on to a space provided by a technology training company and then on to the San Diego County Office of Education. The nature of the meetings, as with many users groups, was self-training by members and occasional guest speakers. In other words, informal adult education in the face of rampant technology change: how does this gadget work?

Understandably, with the acceleration in the sales, use and now dominance of digital over film cameras, and the ability to transport visual images via email and web-based showcases, and the speed with which commercial photography can be accomplished, there has been a pressure for individuals to be able to use image editing programs--whether of the simple sort like Picasa or iFoto--or of the ever-expanding and more sophisticated Adobe Photoshop. So, too, it is understandable that the SDPUG would be under a similar surge in interest. With a leader able to respond to that dynamic in the marketplace, the SDPUG grew from a few hundred individuals to over 2300 by 2007. Stephen Burns Photo-manipulated image by Joe Nalven

The presentations at the meetings shifted from largely members teaching members to invited experts in the field as well as vendors with a range of digital media--of whatever company that fell in the digital media arena. About four years ago, the SDPUG moved from the San Diego County Office of Education Joe Rindone Technology Center to the Art Institute of California-San Diego, a private arts university with branches across the United States. At all times, the SDPUG was able to maintain a free educational forum and developed a reputation as an independent community service.

In March, Jack Davis presented some new spins in Photoshop CS3's Bridge and the related Lightroom program. Close to 120 individuals packed the Art Institute of California. The ever more robust programs and plug-ins and tools demand a knowledgeable presentation. Fortunately for San Diego, Jack Davis is also a San Diegan.Jack Davis Photo-manipulated image by Joe Nalven

Below is a panorama created with six images stitched together in PhotoMerge. [Jack Davis is at the far right.] While photostitching programs have been around for a number of years, PhotoMerge is very intelligent and fast in crafting together images. These images were taken by me--hand held, no flash and sent to a friend, Will Gibson , to composite on his computer. As you may have guessed, I have been reluctant to download the beta version of CS3, but as with all such new technology, I will need a new computer with more memory, a new operating system, a new digital camera as well as CS3..

If we go back for a moment to early 2003, we find that a number of the SDPUG members looked for a platform to expand their opportunities for exhibition with various digital media tools. Not just photocentric media tools, but also painting tools [Cher Pendarvis and Jeremy Sutton have presented workshops at SDPUG to illustrate how Corel Painter operated] and algorithmic tools [such as Ultrafractals] and others have been presented at the SDPUG monthly meetings.

A core group of SDPUG members formed the Digital Art Guild [DAG] to exhibit their work and promote public understanding of digitally-based art.   Illustration by Joe Nalven using Don Relyea's Random Art Generator

To be sure, the SDPUG and DAG relationship is but one perspective on social changes reflecting the use of digital media. Other groups such as the PhotoArts Group, home-based in the Escondido Arts Municipal Gallery (within San Diego) has collaborated with DAG on visual arts shows and has overlapping membership. Also, other groups, such as the North County Photographic Society has taken on a slower, but still necessary adoption of digital technology. Holding the line at a film only technology is no longer practical, especially with the capabilities found in digital cameras.

These transformations are likely proceeding apace all over the world, but distributed in different ways and with different emphases. The San Diego cluster may prove to have somewhat more density than other locales.

This mini-history may leave the reader with a so-what and bemused reflection. It may be my need as a cultural anthropologist to document one area in which this type of technology change is being incorporated, not simply in the schools (which I have not mentioned) but in the average lives of interested members of society. Again, the so-what question may be asked. Here I beg the reader's indulgence to consider how technology changes are incorporated into society from an academic perspective. One of a number of questions has been asked by social observers based in Frankfurt, Germany (and, of course, as with all else, posted for consumption on the internet):

 "How can a transition from the idiocy of the masses and the knowledge of the crowd into a knowledge-generating virtual community be explained?" [Research Network for Media Anthropology / FAME Frankfurt, October 24-26, 2007]

The question seem harsh and asked from a somewhat different perspective than what my mini-history has been describing. A quote from the prospectus may give some insight into the conference's forward thinking ambitions:"All over the globe, artificial cybernetic spaces are something now taken for granted. Computer technology is designed to be ubiquitous, and the direct control of computers by means of brain waves is supplanting control by means of a pointing device or the human eye. Presence and telepresence, key concepts in earlier research, are receding into the background with the advent of computer technologies which can be inserted under the skin, into clothing, and into the eyes and ears or can generate realities in their own right without which the frames of reference of today's and tomorrow's realities will become meaningless."

I admit to feeling like an idiot of sorts when confronted with the multiplicity of technology choices, marketing choices, and other life-style considerations. Not to mention thinking about how intelligence will be directly inserted into the human body via nanochips, brain wave alterations, and smart genes. However, there is a human dimension that the conference organizers may miss, namely, the rather mundane mini-changes that we put into practices, with these curious user groups that consume reality going to the Costcos, WalMarts, Best Buys and Frys and trying to figure it out with a little help from monthly meetings or online bulletin boards. Perhaps this commentary can be taken as a preliminary response to how idiots survive in this ever fascinatiing electronic adventure.

DigitalArtist1