

Chasing the Creative Aesthetic: Both Painterly and Digitally by Lee Zasloff

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It's a real project to try to distill my thoughts about what is, essentially, a life's work in the world of art. Some of my earliest fumbblings consisted of finger paintings in grade school. At the age of five, I decided then and there that I really liked running my fingers and my whole hands through the delicious paints and seeing what kind of masterly and creative results I could come up with. Adding more colors just intrigued and enriched the process for me although I couldn't have expressed that at the time.

Fast forward through high school, CSULB as a college art major and ultimately getting a Master's in Fine Art with a Specialization in Drawing and Painting. At that point, on the one hand I thought I could say I've arrived at the top of the aesthetic mountain. Just ask me. I now have all the formal tools. I can draw, I can paint - but what do I draw or paint? Therein lies the problem dear Yorick. I was a painter without the requisite intriguing voice. My Master's had been about "Reflections on the Square" inquiring into the power of the square as one of the reigning master shapes in art. I chose to paint square within square compositions within 3' canvases, hung them in a lozenge manner a la Mondrian, and softened the colors to mitigate the impact of the very strong, symbolic square. The square, as subject crept up a lot in the early days and doesn't very much now. Other ideas were percolating.

At one point, I reminded myself again that color had always been a great love of mine. Why was I being distracted? It was at this point that I reconnected with the impact and implications of color. I didn't really care what the subject was, I cared about the emotion of color. I looked at the Fauves. I looked at the Post Impressionists. I looked at the Expressionists. I looked at Japanese prints.

Luckily for me, it was also at this point that I began to do more work on my beloved Mac. Teaching courses in Graphic Communication at Palomar College forced me to learn design software programs at a deeper level than I might have including PageMaker, Quark Xpress, Photoshop and most particularly my all time favorite program Painter. I started with Metacreation's Painter 4 and have had a love affair with this program going so far as to teach Painter 5 for Palomar College on the Cox Television Network for two years starting in 1998 until 2000. What evolved for me as an artist was I now had a much bigger sandbox to play in. I could create things solely in the digital world. I could paint in acrylic and watercolor to re-experience the joy of moving luscious and sensual paints over surfaces and/or I could combine the two. I could always experiment digitally. If I got something that worked, I might paint a formal painting moving from the digital result to the conventional painted canvas. OR I could paint a piece, take digital photos and then use the wizardry of Photoshop and/or Painter to improve, experiment, meditate or frolic through many and ongoing possibilities. I could work fast. I could try new ideas quickly. At the other end of the creative range from painting, I could create entirely in the digital world using Photoshop, Painter and my trusty Wacom tablet. What became intriguing to me was the particularly 21st century ability to mix the painterly with a sincere exploration of new technical creative processes that were exploding daily. It's this area where tech culture and the world of paint overlap that I find most exciting and compelling.

There are still some people who say that works created digitally don't have artistic integrity and relevance because they rely on happenstance or accident or software tools or filters. Unless I'm very much mistaken, there's also a creative mind behind the keys and the software directing, exploring, experimenting, considering, correcting, experimenting yet again, pondering, problem-solving, invigorating the result, inputting and reworking. I say dismissing digital works is too easy and belies a shallow understanding of the inherent creative process. I believe any creative exploration has merit whether it's been painted, drawn, digitally created, manipulated environmentally, photographed from life or adjusted life, staged as happenings, or any thing else the mind of man and woman can come up with. Many times it's that mental exploration and experimentation that has the most relevance - the end product created being the less important. However, for those of you who need a product, there's always an ability to create giclées on paper or canvas. It's good to think that we're creating something touchable. Also, I think some of us get bogged down trying to answer the question of what is it then that defines creativity? The computer doesn't. It's a tool. A fancy palette.

For me creativity is synonymous with experimentation, exploration and no rules. Play and enjoy could be the mantra! See what happens!

So, in a nutshell then, I work as a painter. I work as a digital artist. I think it's this juxtaposition that will ultimately ensure the public's acceptance of this new dual dynamic of computer and paint; time and exposure also being elements to make our audiences more tech savvy.

As for me, I shift my focus back and forth between the two mediums. I continually try and retry. For me, the emphasis is never on the technical aspects of Painter or Photoshop, although I do like to "play around" with all the palettes, sliders and any other permutations I can get my "hands" on. For me, it's always the aesthetic meanderings and problem solvings and surprise factor. I like to juggle fanciful ideas, benign memories and

technology and use these to get my exploratory juices going. I experiment. I like the results. I experiment. I don't like the results. I'm frustrated. I try again. I contemplate. I work some more. I add. I subtract. I try adding other stuff. I try subtracting other stuff. I reinvent. I explore. I'm an artist.

So - having said all that, here are some of the results. Starting somewhere back at the beginning: this piece above is called Geisha and was created entirely on computer using an early version of Painter. I liked the digital result so much that I painted an acrylic version on 24"x30" canvas and titled it Geisha 2. Essentially, I worked out the element of mystery and how much of the face I could remove and still have it read on computer and then painted from the digital image. (Left Geisha Digital and Right Geisha Painted) Gather Ye Rosebuds

I became very interested in the glorious qualities of light, movement and color in the koi pond. I painted a huge amount of koi. Two examples of my conventional works are below. Gather Ye Rosebuds is a watercolor, Size: 44"x56" framed. What I worked to achieve was a certain rhythmic quality to the composition, very soothing colors and a mysterious quality of "now you see it, now you don't" aspect below the surface of the water.

This diptych also explores the environment of the koi pond. This time, it's executed in acrylic on paper. Size: 56" x 43" framed. Again, the rhythm and balance of the composition was very important. As well, I wanted to emphasize how sharp the edges of the shapes were and, in contrast, the hypnotic quality of the reflections on the water.

Carpe Diem

Here's another piece I painted electronically, entitled Illuminata (below). This image was chosen to be in Ballistic Publishing's 2006 edition of Painter, The World's Finest Painter Art. I was very pleased that my image was chosen from a worldwide juried competition of 2600 entries to select 209 images from 128 artists in 29 countries. I wanted to explore again the sense of movement, the luscious quality of color and the textural quality of the many types of brushmarks available in Painter. Ultimately, I wanted to create the sense of a diffused, water-laden, dramatic and mysterious surface.

Illuminata

This next piece, Tubes came about when I happened to glance down from a painting I was working on at my easel and saw all these tubes of paint lying haphazardly on the table. I was intrigued by the angles, the shapes, the juxtaposition of the graphics and the negative spaces. I took a lot of digital pictures, reworked the composition and contrast until I had a good value range. I then brought the piece into Painter to add color using different colors on separate layers and also using the layer interaction and opacity qualities of Photoshop. I continued to experiment with whatever filters came to mind just continuing to play, rework and adjust until I got something that worked. I used to tell my students you should write down everything you're doing, but I get caught up in the creative process and don't want to stop. Fortunately, Photoshop has the history setting. My version of Painter doesn't.

Tubes

Another interesting exploration was using this painting which is part of my Beauty Series. I liked the color, brushwork and composition of the two profiles and felt it functioned well as an interesting and strong painting. I also thought this painting would be fun to "play around" with digitally. What I was interested in doing on computer was adding pattern and texture, that could only have been achieved digitally, to subtly alter the work without taking away from the initial drama and statement. Beauty Series - painted
Beauty Series - digital

And sometimes, girls just want to have fun on computer. This piece below entitled Swing Time, is a classic example of cut and paste play on computer to combine different elements of photos taken. I then combined and recombined the photographs, added drawn elements and worked to create the whimsy. How Swing Time came about was I was walking on the beach and noticed one of those power boxes that had an extremely rusted top surface. I took a lot of pictures and isolated the section of one photo that seemed the most interesting texturally. When I looked at the rich black opening, it seemed to me like a stage and needed something dramatic or circus-like. The opening seemed perfect for a trapeze artist. I got the trapeze image from an early Painter image file, enhanced and actually almost completely redrew it to get the color and texture that I wanted, and pasted it into the black area of the photographed image. When I looked at the combined piece, I thought it was effective and interesting, but not finished somehow - the composition wasn't resolved. I decided my trapeze artist needed to have an audience. To introduce whimsy, humor and a large-scale, brightly colored focal point, I drew this adorable red bird. Enlarging the scale of the bird added just the right touch to complete and balance the composition. Swing Time

This painting shown below was just finished in July 2007. I call it Borboleta which is Portugese for butterfly. I started to

get interested in the design elements of a butterfly's wings and downloaded lots of small photos from Google Images. I reworked the images digitally and chose one as a starting point for the finished painting. The work was painted without very much initial planning other than a light sketch to figure out scale and placement. I like the quality of spontaneous brushwork and especially like the way the brushwork enlivens the surface and invites the viewer to be part of the painting process. What's fascinating about the digital element is sometimes we don't have to do too much on computer to get terrific results. I took the digital file of the painting of "Borboleta" into Painter using Effects/Surface Control/ Woodcut and got the effect shown below. I like it very much both for the almost old grainy film quality and most particularly for the sharp , rhythmic and dramatic quality of line that the filter brought out.

Above Borboleta; Below Borboleta Woodcut

I continue to work to playfully challenge perceptions, enjoy myself and hopefully create works that give myself and others pleasure.

[Lee Zasloff's website](#)