

Hitch Hiking on the Digital Highway by Raymond St. Arnaud

Programming complete, job submitted, you then waited 24 to 48 hours for output in the form of pen line drawing on paper. What was of note about this experience is that the Fine Art department was allocated a computer budget, but didn't know what to do with it. The only use anyone in the faculty had discovered was to do typesetting.

"First you counted on your fingers, and then doubled your computing power, by counting your toes." Well it wasn't quite that primitive, but it was different.

1974:

I was a student at the University of Alberta taking some fine art courses. By a strange serpentine chain of events, I found myself producing line drawings of an imaginary object with an Amdahl computer. Imagine an air conditioned hallowed place, off limits to all but the initiated priesthood of the computing department. Normal mortals could only access the inner sanctum by looking through the service counter. The Amdahl was an alternate to the IBM main frames used in large institutional programming. Sometimes referred to as Big Iron because of the kind of memory it used.

A deposit of a student card yielded a type ball for an IBM Selectric typewriter. This was the input device. The inner sanctum did have a few monitors. They looked and performed like those Hollywood movie shots of radar screens from WWII. Four degrees of separation through glass was as close I could see.

The drawings were produced by altering parameters in the computer code. There were few options. The viewpoint could be altered by height and distance relative to the object, plus rotation of the object. A fourth parameter was transparency. Could you see through the object, or would it behave like a solid and hide areas behind other parts.

University of Alberta Amdahl Graphic

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What was of note about this experience is that the Fine Art Department was allocated a computer budget, but didn't know what to do with it. The only use anyone in the faculty had discovered was to do typesetting. Considering the computer and infrastructure probably cost 6 million dollars, I can only imagine the cost per character generated.

1975:

I was infected and the computer bug left me in deep withdrawal. I resorted to browsing computer magazines. They all featured bingo cards for product information. I would dutifully circle the little numbers for product that might be of use for computer art.

I have heard of people using this technique to accumulate paper to burn in their fireplaces to heat their cabins. They got more use from the information than I did, as everything was always too expensive or too arcane to be of any use to a bottom feeder computer person.

I go off and paint on canvas.

Late 1980s:

My wife acquires an IBM clone 386 for her business as a programmer. I get too dabble with a hand held scanner and a few ray tracing programs.

1992:

I have the opportunity to go to Kodak's Centre for Creative Imaging in Camden Maine to take a week long Photoshop course, courtesy of Kodak Canada. This is the Mecca, the Rome of digital imaging. Three floors of a refurbished mill house all the latest state of the art gadgetry; high end workstations, Macs for the beginners, scanners, printers, software and a fabulous instructor in the person of Katrin Eisemann. Plus a very good lunch bar.

I dream of pixels and get up at 4 am to go back to the labs. Yes there is 24 hour access. My wife takes the car and goes to Boston.

By the end of the week I am overwhelmed and blown away. As we drive out of town, I forget everything I learned.

Because I am on a PC and Photoshop 2 is Mac only, I buy Aldus Photostyler, which is very similar to Photoshop, but better. Somewhere in this time period I flirt with the Kodak Photo CD process, but then opt for the first Nikon Coolscan film scanner.

1993:

Then Adobe buys out Aldus to acquire PageMaker and kills PhotoStyler, but offers a side grade to Photoshop 3. At first I am really excited as I will have all those supposed advantages I read about in the magazines. The first file I try, Photoshop can't open because it's too big. The advantages turn out to be different terminology and vocabulary.

I eventually make peace within myself and dutifully send in my money to Adobe for Photoshop upgrades.

1998:

A stellar year. This is it. The big turning point. What have we all been doing for all these years? How many hours and lists did I haunt or post to looking for the output solution?

We have been looking for an affordable digital colour printer.
It comes in the form of an ink set from Lyson of England for the Epson 3000.

It's a difficult ink set to use. It has a weird, twisted colour gamut with a disposition to print green. The contrast and saturation are low and the effect is compounded because of uncoated papers. This is where I cut my teeth on Photoshop curves to force color correction, to force greater saturation and contrast.

This is also the start of liberation for me as a computer based visual artist. I now have tangible output that can be held in the hand.

It can be hung on a wall.

It can be exhibited.

Eventually, I upgrade to the Epson 4800 and I marvel at its wizardry.

2005:

I discover book publishing through print-on-demand technology. It comes as a solution to a photo project from 1996. The photographs were intended to be a print exhibition, but circumstances dictated otherwise. The project lay dormant for almost ten years. I was able to resurrect it and finalize it in my own mind by printing it as a book.

The content of the book wasn't as significant as discovering the process of Print On Demand. I have followed up with the five additional books listed below, and as of September, 2008, books seven, eight and nine are in review by a copy editor, and book ten is in the layout stage.

The advantages of creating books range from their long life, their ease of distribution, simple storage and simple viewing.

2008: Tradition Comforts Revelation exhibited in Urban Legends and Country Tales / Bonita Museum, California

It has been a long rocky road from there to here. It seems at times that innovation faces the difficulty of acceptance by the traditional forms that preceded it. Notwithstanding that those current forms were once considered innovative and subject to the same difficulty. Tradition understands this, and can offer comfort, but little else to revelation.

This image reflects an attitude of heightened awareness and receptivity, without being analytical. The subsequent manipulation of colour, contrast and detail are key features of my development as an artist that goes back to 1970.

The Books:

27 After 25 (54 images - published 2005):

Portraits of 27 instructors who taught through the first 25 years at Camosun College, Victoria, BC. Autobody

Outside the Box (42 images – published 2007):

This was a collection of images that I used to examine the premise of replicating the look of traditional printmaking techniques with computer software. The typically look like a combination of etching and lithography and were created as 40-60 layer Photoshop documents from 1998 to 2002. The original images for OTBX are from slides or negatives from 1970 to 1990.

On The Edge of the Golden Carpet

Outside the Box was more than a symbolic title, as it represented a freedom from the rigors of maintaining the physical space of a traditional art making studio/darkroom and all its supplies, tools and materials.

As Seen on TV (15 images, 15 detail – published 2007):

Where "Outside the Box" was based on broad printmaking techniques, "As Seen on TV" was derived from a concept created while a student (1974-75). The images examine different representations of how TV images have been or could be visualized as components of an image. The original images come from the same pool as OTBX and were created from 2001 to 2003.

On the Advent of Blue

On the Advent of Blue - Detail

Reflections: The Pre-Millennium Landscapes (120 images – published 2007):

A series depicting abstracted reflections on the surface of antique, or near antique cars. This was a multi year project with some of the images captured on film, some as digital originals from 2004 to 2007. Once again, this project was based on an old idea. I had not been able to come to terms with the concept in the 1970s and had abandoned it. It resurrected itself 30 odd years later.

Pre-Millennium Landscape #63

The Dysfunctional Photographer (100 images - published 2008):

The Forced March (100 images - published 2008): Based on the premise of an image per day for 100 days. These two books were photographed simultaneously. They were an examination of my immediate personal and geographic surroundings, a reflection of my day to day activity. That activity could generate from the natural flow of life, or could be forced, by leaving an interior environment and confronting the exterior.

Observer at a Crucifixion from The Dysfunctional Photographer

Urban Forest No.2 - Wth Razor Wire from The Forced March On the technical side, these images all featured forced or exaggerated colour, contrast and detail. Once again an old idea based on experiments conducted in the early 1970s.

Those experiments used traditional film materials and film masks and resulted in exaggerated contrast and colour.

I find myself in a different camp from where I was in 1996. Then, I photographed images with the intent of a public exhibition. Now, I photograph with the intent of producing a book. There may or may not be an exhibition drawn from its pages. A big advantage is that the book is under personal control, and becomes an achievable goal. An exhibition is dependant on many outside parameters that may be beyond an artist's control.

All the images of the published books can be seen on my website, Raymond St. Arnaud .