

Reflections on Urban Legends and Country Tales by Mel Strawn

When juxtaposition, transparency and color are invoked in a digital workflow, they often lead to rich and unexpected works, partly because these are interactive, at your finger tips, fast and efficient. In yet other cases, subtly different because digitally handled qualities are present in seemingly traditional images.

First, a word about my approach to discussing the works in this show. I am a painter, printmaker, photographer and teacher with more than half a century involvement with images and art-making processes. I first started working with digital imaging in 1980-81 when personal computers became widely available. I acted as one of three jurors for the Urban Legends and Country Tales exhibition (2008) but regard myself as a fellow artist/printmaker.

Given that the show was restricted to digital processes, just what that limitation yields has to be part of the consideration. An initial overview shows that the title Legends and Tales, invoking a literary direction or bias, is reflected in the narrative imagery of a majority of the works. This is roughly consistent with the general subject/style trends of contemporary art overall. Specifically, some 12% were abstract, the rest involved representational imagery of some sort. Of this majority, some 63% invited or invoked a narrative, story-like response; the rest of the non-abstract group were more objective, that is, presented things to look at and contemplate but not necessarily suggest a narrative interpretation; whatever reading one does is non-verbal. This simple breakdown just provides a general view of tendencies in artist's orientation re style and subject.

How the works were made is a major consideration along with the question of if and in what ways did the medium (digital processing) characterize, contribute to, delimit or diminish the works? And has this changed, advanced or shifted a dominant direction in the quarter century that art-via-computer has been with us? Even more important, but part of that consideration — has the digital workspace and process resulted in anything distinctive or essentially new and different when considered in the broader context of visual art. Or, as a friend long ago asked me, "what's the advantage?" A partial answer: the great efficiency and speed with which visual components can be employed to preview and explore possibilities is inviting and eye-mind opening.

Some factors that have arguably added significance and import to modern art, especially since the 1940s is scale, the (large) size of a work relative to the 5 to 6 foot height of a person (the artist and the viewer). Yes, I'll take a small Vermeer over a huge but mediocre work; still, large works imply the impact of large scale as part of the message.

So what is the scale of a typical digital print, say those in the Legends exhibition? The physical size is small, a limitation of the show's rules. The digital file however lends itself to quite dramatic enlargement through large scale (up to billboard size) digital prints and even larger through projection not to speak of global transmission for visualization anywhere. Let's stick to the small size prints here. Their lack of physical size is compensated for by the possible intricacy (resolution) and detail (information of a sort) which create an effect of bigness, importance — lots of stuff to take in, a large experience in a small space. This tends to work in our imagination and mind rather than viscerally, physically like a mural-size confrontational painting or sculpture. Those large works tend to bowl us over and envelop us; our small digital works tend to draw us in.

Color, juxtaposition and transparency

Several ways to extend the visual experience have been advanced by the art of the last century: color, juxtaposition via collage and montage, transparency and multiple views employing various techniques including, importantly, the first three mentioned here.

In painting, color has been freed from the local coloring of objects, being used as a pure or direct experiential element with its own rules. Juxtaposition became a key strategy of surrealism and of the cubist development which disassembled and reassembled different views or slices of things. The picture space became more indeterminate in time and space, more ambiguous. The completely interchangeable, ubiquitous digital bit has brought the possibility of realizing all these visual strategies to every digital artist with a seemingly effortless level of technical precision. I think this is both blessing and curse; strong tools need to be used with care and not used just for easy effect.

While "a bit is a bit is a bit" and millions of distinct colors are at one's fingertips, they are the same for everyone. And these colors initially exist as bit-encoded, pure, interally discrete pixels of light on a screen; they are optical, non tactile. The digital palette lacks some of the organic/mineral uniqueness that other media offer. Arguably, this pure, optical color array of pixels imparts a sameness, a kind of cleanness, to all digital, monitor-based images; and we try to make our prints as close to that monitor image as possible. Efforts to counter this (and to do other things as well) have seen artists output digital images to various substrates and to mix digital with other media in technically complex, hybrid works. And to be fair, on strictly optical viewing the variety and expressive use of color offered in the works in this

show is substantial even if almost automatically pure.

One of the things not present in the works in this show is the exploration of variables under a broader consideration of digital art and its characteristics – what is possible in the digital computer workspace. The dominant program tools used by these artists (including me) is Photoshop® or somewhat similar programs like Painter® which provide tool-like interfaces useful in developing and manipulating images. The result is that these digital works are in the same ballpark, same realm of intents and expectations as the traditional media categories. They are prints similar to other prints and paintings. They do much the same things in basically the same ways, using, sometimes, some of the modern strategies discussed above. Variables are introduced into the potential of (in this case) a visual outcome, an image, through algorithms or programs which control the generation of visual displays either static images or ongoing kinetic events. One creates or selects a program, launches it – and lets the program generate one or more of the variable possibilities. The result is usually unexpected and often a delightful surprise. Fractal programs provide artists (and others) some ways to get into this. Being a bit naïve and uninformed early on I learned how to write programs in simple BASIC in order to make visual stuff appear as electronic pictures. Unfortunately, the tools developed for and adopted by artists do not include much in the way of accessing algorithmic possibilities in a creative way and not too many artists are programmers. Fractal programs offer a lot of potential, but they seem to be still a very circumscribed zone in the arena of possibilities offered by working with variables. Our usual processes instead, are similar to the manual/mental procedures of age-old traditional art. Working in Photoshop/Painter type programs does however promote very complex and adventurous exploration of varied possibilities. It would be interesting to see a digital show that emphasized non-representational, abstract work (imagery?) as a complement to this one that emphasizes a literary and representational content.

My own experience in both traditional and digital media has given me a great appreciation of what is special in both. While every medium and process yields and makes possible some characteristics different from those coming from other media, the speed and efficiency of digital processes do more than leave a fingerprint quality (see the discussion on digital color above). Digital media and processes open very complex ways to create visual form, subtle and sophisticated ways to visually (plastically) make forms and images – as in painting or drawing – that capture, alter, amplify, combine, etc. It is process rich; time, space and scale become potentially fluid and interchangeable. When juxtaposition, transparency and color are invoked in a digital workflow, they often lead to rich and unexpected works, partly because these are interactive, at your finger tips, fast and efficient. In yet other cases, subtly different because digitally handled qualities are present in seemingly traditional images.

In 1951 Paul Theobald published Gyorgy Kepes's seminal and influential book, *Language of Vision*, in which he said: "Today creative artists have three tasks to accomplish if the language of vision is to be made a potent factor in reshaping our lives. They must learn and apply the laws of plastic organization needed for the re-establishing of the created image on a healthy basis. They must make terms with contemporary spatial experiences to learn to utilize the visual representation of contemporary space-time events. Finally they must release the reserves of creative imagination and organize them into dynamic idioms, that is, develop a contemporary, dynamic iconography."

The rest of the book deals with what he thinks all that means to us. I bring it up here because I wonder if (we) digital artists are aware of and are addressing that challenge. I wonder if we think it relevant to our task as artists today. In very general terms what it means is that modern ways of imaging should and could be developed to adequately convey contemporary experience and ideas – which are not the same as in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Digital: A contemporary way of making art

Digital capture and processing is clearly a contemporary way of making images and art – although some have questioned if art is even possible with these technologies. More interesting, at least to me, is the question of, or if, it has advanced or contributed to the creation of challenging modern works, works which take us beyond those developed in conventional ways in conventional media, that is, works which explore and build on the major achievements in visual art of the past (20th) century. Has our use of digital means led to significant new forms of expression, new modes of seeing and making images? I leave it as an open question – but discuss it a bit more below.

I think, in viewing this show many times, that most, if not all of us, are using digital media to make art that fits into what art has traditionally been. While not creating a whole new visual language, digital means have made possible new and enriching gambits. Many take photography beyond mere capture but leave behind, perhaps, the hand-made qualities and significant personal, idiosyncratic ways of making form used by most artists traditionally. That is, our photo operations replace what happens when an artist perceives or imagines a form or event and then directly shapes that in plastic material and space. The spatial representation is often pre-20th century, that is, renaissance linear perspective (an optical characteristic of photography)! The forms are largely representations of known things and objects; the style is realistic. The few abstract works are reminiscent of well-known 20th century artists and styles.
Renata Spiazzi, *The Creation of the Universe*

One work, *The Creation of the Universe*, by Renata Spiazzi (who knows very well how to draw) uses the digital computer to make an elegant spatial form that represents nothing else but might be considered in relation to da Vinci's studies of flowing water, whirlpools, etc. It suggests Gödel Escher Bach and contemporary interests in chaos theory. It exists in what I would call mental space with no reference to world-bound fixed perspective or landscape space. The art to which this comes closest is the mental space of Asian calligraphy particularly Zen graphic works and images. Kat Larsen's *And Then There Was Life* (following nicely on a thematic thread) links that kind of mental space with things of the world imagined cosmically. Kat Larsen, *And Then There Was Life*

Other works certainly use transparency and the implications of time-space dynamics, often in a romantic, mythic and/or surreal sense. Film has famously developed that dynamic in years past. Eisenstein's key concept was the shot and cutting and inter-cutting from one shot to another — multiple points of view in juxtaposition. Fades, time warps, transparency and the suspension of the laws of gravity are all in the digital repertoire.

The rendering of digital images on the monitor or, as here, in printed versions, is uniformly immaculate. One yearns for a bit of gummy crudeness. I don't think there is a digital art style, and I've noted some technical-optical characteristics that might describe digital means serving as media, as a tool and processing set. They do make complex operations very efficient and so invites experimentation. The potential and promise of fresh expressions is there. The range of works in this show realize much of that very well.

Unthinkability; The Language of Vision; Art in America

But let me return to what I think is still a challenging question phrased in a slightly different way. Are we digital artists using the potential of the digital workspace to explore, even advance the ways we see and think about the world? In a timely new book, *The Age Of The Unthinkable* (2009), author Joshua Cooper Ramo takes us back to 1915 Paris. A French artist working as a soldier had invented camouflage. Gertrude Stein and Picasso, walking home after a dinner, saw a French army vehicle with splotches of paint all over it. Picasso said "it is we who made it, that is cubism!" Cubism had just developed (1910 on) as an attempt to see dynamically — from different points of view in space and time — and thus to deal with a different reality than the static snapshot image that had characterized art for centuries. Ramo makes the point that others (not artists) seeing the army vehicles would have noted the passing of a convoy — and missed recognizing that it was visually transformed by a new way of using visual information (camouflage) and that that was part of a radical change in the language of vision and reality. It is interesting that Ramo, talking about the current challenges we face on all fronts, went back almost 100 years to find that it was artists who were aware, alive and sensitive to the profound changes that even then were afoot and who had the creativity to work toward new ways of seeing and thinking and feeling. Ramo's further point is that a fixed, static world view still prevails in our corridors of power and for most people — and that to cope, a change in vision in ways of thinking and composing one's world view, one's vision, is essential.

This echoes Kepes's call for a visual language that reflects and influences the realities of a changing world. Ramo chose to go back 96 years for his example; why not from today's art and artists? He could have, since many artists have extended the visual implications of modernist pioneers and have taken the technology of visual and auditory media including TV and video to create all sorts of Urban Legends and Country Tales. Mostly urban? Still, I wonder if there is a significant advance in ways of seeing in today's art because of the digital workspace we employ. If the increased (digital) information load and fluidity in, especially, kinetic works such as we experience daily on TV (ads!) is the cutting edge of media as influencing message, then one could argue that it works against beneficial understanding and action in the corridors of power and for most people. The media uses whatever technology is available. I don't think that media or technology as such has a pervasive effect on habits of mind. An effective change of mental habits requires a total integration of formal/technical means with a conceptual/cognitive dynamic that is broader and deeper than entertainment in popular media. Digital means employed to animate leaves us with — well, an animation of essentially the same experience. Digital pictures don't necessarily change the essential picture.

Art In America magazine, April 2009 issue, has an extensive consideration of the Pictures Generation (1970s and 80s). This includes discussion of assumptions about artists working digitally, linking the art to film and the artist to the role of director. The variety of actual works from that time, as shown in the articles, does not fit into any general mode or ism. No single technology was a hallmark; digital was just emerging as just another way to do stuff. The artist's various ideas were crucial — not the technology. They used what was at hand and current, not necessarily what the art supply stores marketed as art materials.

It seems obvious to me that the post medieval drive to master optical reality, nearly trumped in the 19th Century by photography, and digital photography itself, has come to dominate what is done in digital art making. We use, predominantly perhaps, Photoshop®. This has, however in many cases, gone beyond static imaging. An imaginative extension in a more fluid time, space, event realm is given dynamic feet by digital processes, easily understood by viewing a kinetic presentation on monitor or wide screen movie format. Does this fit with the assumption of digital artists as film directors? I guess I'm looking for more examples of this kind of dynamic in our non-kinetic prints however

technically realized. Considering some more works

Back to Urban Legends. The catalog put together by Joe Nalven is a subtle wonder. Virtually every facing page pair of images presents implicitly a compare-and-contrast visual and/or thematic study.

Dia de los Muertos – two versions with the same title by different artists Dana Levine and Lee Zasloff. Both can be seen in the light of art history – the 17th century mode of Georges de la Tour for Dana’s, and early to mid 20th century (Paul Klee and or Bonnard?) for Lee’s. While the picture spaces are radically different (perspective and 20th century flat) each is rich and cohesive in tonality and color inviting a good long look at the wealth of detail and theme material offered.

Dana Levine, Dia de los Muertos
Lee Zasloff, Dia de los Muertos

Two others one can enjoy in an art historical context are Peter Axcell’s Room With a View and Guernica at Plaza Brunelleschi, Florence by Vladimir Kone ni.

Vladimir Kone ni, Guernica at Plaza Brunelleschi, Florence

The Guernica piece is basically, to me, a great documentary shot. What makes it great is the insertion of the angular play of fragmented light with the angular, shattered (in two senses) Picasso. That it could have been done with a conventional film camera or tediously by hand painting is beside the point.

Pete Axcell, Room With a View

Axcell’s piece elegantly echoes Dali’s surreal Spanish coast pieces and his tiny, famous Persistence of Memory. That each invokes such memory awareness is part of the content and value of these modern works that use modern tools to present.

One of the most haunting images in the show is Robotic Stepford Wife by Marie Otero. It is not just a collage as in early cut and paste collages of the 1900s. It is an image that is somehow modeled in light and dark but is also imbedded in a richly varied, textured and patterned field that flows right through it, giving it a different sort of transparency.

Marie Otero, Robotic Stepford Wife

Its scale (very large in its space) is the close-up of film; and also recalls woodblock prints of women by Japanese ukiyo-e printmakers Utamaro and Sharaku. The delicate, lacey, orange flower network answers the encroaching tangle of tree branches. The whole color scheme is reminiscent of the ukiyo-e prints. Rippling, repetitious, digitally-precise contour lines suggest a possible indeterminant locus of the woman’s presence. It is in that near mechanical repetition and the unfocused, not looking at you, eyes that robotic seems appropriate.

I’ve reflected on the Urban Legends and Country Tales works relative to two other more or less concurrent exhibits of prints. One is the show, at the Denver Art Museum, of Psychedelic Posters, mostly from the decades of the 60s to the 80s. The other is a 40 year collection of lithographs done at Tamarind. I was struck by the almost brutal energy of the posters, many of which use some of the same technology (photographs) as our digital works. The posters seem more direct, frontal and part of 19th and 20th century modern art. Some, however and to the contrary, use lots of meticulous, illustrational hand drawing and WANTED poster design and typography from the American West. The space of the poster is typically not that of the picture window. Rather, it is the wall, flat, 2-d, confrontational. It is graphic, not pictorial, even when it contains or presents pictures. This is the flat space of some modern 20th century art. Our digital prints often operate on a different assumption, that of the picture window, the scene through the viewfinder.

The Tamarind lithographs only occasionally use photo imagery. They exploit the wet and dry manual processes native to that medium. And it seems to me that a greater variety of individual qualities in both technical handling and conception, importantly conception conditioned by the more limited and usually labor intensive technical parameters, distinguishes those works from our digital prints. I infer no better-or-worse judgment here, but it is clear that the media does lead one to a different way of conceiving, exploring and composing. And even in the seemingly pure photographs in the Urban Tales show digital handling (manipulation?) can make an expressive and poetic difference.

To sum up

It may seem that I've argued too extensively on the limitations of digital printmaking by challenging what isn't rather than on what is the wide range of achievements in this show and elsewhere. That is not my intention. I've tried to acknowledge some of the often-raised questions and to describe what I see and to place it in relevant contexts. I've pointed out some periods and developments in art that provide a challenging context for artists today. Long aware of the dismissals we've heard early on to the effect that digital art has a typical look and questionable credentials, I've raised questions, based in my own sensibility and involvement as artist, on how and to what degree, comparatively, digital practice as shown in the Urban Legends show is evidence of something distinct and valuable, how it extends the dynamic visual language we inherit, and how it does not look all alike but has qualities that distinguish it from other print forms. Could it, digital printmaking, be more distinctive considering the challenge of other categories mentioned?

Perhaps, but in any case, it is the individual artist's creativity and vision that makes the art, whatever the medium used.

For more commentary from Mel Strawn