

Exploring the Idea of the Digital Brushstroke by Lee Zasloff

I sometimes wonder what the reaction of the art world, the so called knowledgeable people, would be if they had no way of identifying a work as digitally produced as in my *White Lotus 3*.

Some questions ought not to be asked simply because the answer appears obvious. However, for those interested in drawing boundaries between digital and artistic, such a question of nuance can become a worthy reflection. Especially so since the advent of accepted digital art continues to stir the ire of some classically trained artists and some art critics. Even defining a digital brushstroke can become a rallying point of contention.

JD Jarvis approaches this question broadly by asking, "Can something be called 'painting' if the artist uses tools other than handheld brushes and pigments suspended in a medium?"¹ Elsewhere Jarvis has playfully stated that a seemingly obvious brushstroke was not what it appeared to be because of its rendition in digital media and hence a series of electronic algorithms and light smudges.²

I'd like to approach the brushstroke from a different vantage point. Not from a semantic point of view, not from a limited time period and especially not from the notion that things should never change.

My approach to the reality of the brushstroke is as a classically trained fine artist who also works digitally, thus having a leg in both camps.

Shown below is Roy Lichtenstein's *Brush Stroke*, 1965. This is a silkscreen print and was created before the advent of digital imaging programs. It does have that digital or mechanical look that comes to mind for many people who are unfamiliar with how a digital drawing or painting can look.

Brush Stroke (1965) by Roy Lichtenstein

Is this a valid piece of fine art? Yes, of course it is if only based on the reputation of its creator, Roy Lichtenstein. But more than its classification by curators and collectors and more than its title, the image is trying to emulate the look of a brushstroke, more from the point of view of the composition, apparent realism and graphic quality than any intention to fool anyone into thinking it's the genuine article. Why was that acceptable and today's digital brushstroke is not?

Wiktionary says: Noun
brushstroke (plural brushstrokes)

1. The stroke of a brush, as in painting.

Corel Painter® and more recently Adobe Photoshop® has the capability to define a brush stroke to match the sensitivity of the artist's motion across the surface of a tablet with a wireless pen. The harder you press, the deeper or more saturated the color. Various brushes are available with a dazzling array of choices which include size, pressure, opacity, defusing, spacing of the elements of the stroke, color, pattern, etc.

So, if we're talking about the act of creating or painting, I don't think it matters how we arrive at the final result. We are replacing conventional technology in the form of paints and brushes with the newer technology of digital paints and brushes. And we are using virtual surfaces that come to life and light in the form of a giclée on paper, canvas transfer or any other surface that can be made to receive the ink jet inks most commonly used. The method of arrival, as far as I'm concerned as an art practitioner, does not matter at all. What is important and central to the question are the creative factors, explorations and considerations that have gone into the final artwork. A valid painting or drawing has considered and incorporated some or all of the visual elements of color, shape, line, composition, space, value or light.

Of course, there are artists exploring conceptual or process art that aren't necessarily bound by conventional visual elements. But there still has to be a structure, an idea, a game plan, a consideration, a thought.

As an artist working on a Wacom® tablet, a world of even more distinct, seemingly infinite and astonishing choices have opened up. When I am working, I am using the Wacom wireless pen that works with the surface of the tablet. So couldn't I choose to call this Wacom pen my brush or pencil? I can and I do. Language is pliable and has always adapted to new technology. Imagine what a telephone looked like fifty years ago and what it has become today and imagine if someone objected to the same word being used in both instances. That would be odd. In the case of an electronic pen (instead of an art brush), I can use lighter or harder pressure to change the saturation of the stroke colors or influence the shape or subtlety of the beginning or end of the stroke.

What I was exploring and focusing on in *White Lotus 3*, shown below, was creating the appearance of realism using natural colors and a pleasing composition. I've shown this print to many people and most who see it think it has been hand drawn. As you can see, there is what appears to be pencil lines and chalk, but if you look closely, you can see spatter patterns that were done with the pattern and special effects brushes in Corel Painter. The smudge effects also reinforce the quality of hand drawn, yet are easily done in Painter. The uneven edge also presents the notion of an original drawing. And yet, for me, this IS an original drawing and has the same thought and considerations that a drawing on paper would have. There is no difference.

White Lotus 3 (1998) by Lee Zasloff

The Japanese illustrator, Hiroshi Yoshii, said years ago, "at last I have a medium that works as fast as my imagination." Corel Painter's software now supplies Yoshii, and any other artist using this software, with the greatest studio in the world to support that imagination!

As I'm working, I have this continuing conversation saying -- "Let's try this. No, let's try that. No let's try something else." And the thinking and experimenting and surprise goes on and on ad infinitum. I sometimes wonder what the reaction of the art world, the so called knowledgeable people, would be if they had no way of identifying a work as digitally produced as in my *White Lotus 3* above. Would there be a higher level of acceptability if the viewer thought it had been hand drawn on Hahnemühle® or any other fine art paper?

Antherium, below, is another piece I drew freehand using Corel Painter 10®. What is compelling in this artwork is the color and the brushstrokes. I love using the oil palette knife, the smeary palette knife, medium bristle oils, oil pastels to achieve the blending that is so reminiscent of actual oil pastels, oils or acrylics and clearly shows the so-called hand of the artist. This is not what most people think of as digital. And that is just the point. Digital, for a lot of people, either means mechanical looking or mathematical shapes or works produced from a photo taken with a digital camera or a collage or compilation of juxtaposed imagery cut, pasted and possibly overlaid.

Antherium (2008) by Lee Zasloff

If the imagery does not fit into those familiar categories and the viewer is uneducated, the digital painting or drawing can easily be mistaken for conventional work until closer inspection shows the lack of any texture on the paper or canvas surface. Actually, even this is easily remedied by brushing on a clear coating such as Mod Podge® and brushing it on in such a way that the surface now looks like textured brush strokes. My sarcastic voice mimics the naïf and ideologue: "Voilà! Instant art! More acceptability = more sales!" The focus should not be whether a digitally produced artwork is less or more acceptable than a conventionally created artwork is not where that focus should be. It should be on the quality of the work. To my way of thinking, if the exploration is honest, the artwork is honest. The medium is the least important feature for me. The end result is the most important.

Brush Play(2009) Lee Zasloff

The figure *Brush Play* provides examples of various brush strokes using oil palette knife, the smeary palette knife, medium bristle oils, oil pastels and the chalk pattern pen.

Brush Play illustrates how easily and beautifully the strokes in digital media can be overlaid, smudged, made to interact and freely work together to achieve a more painterly effect if that is the goal of the artist. On the other hand, if you like a harder edge or a photo-realistic style or photography whose images are enhanced digitally or any of the available and extensive variations, then, why not? Go right ahead.

James Coleman, a Disney Studios artist born in Hollywood, California in 1949 had this to say on his short stint at art school: "One of the teachers said he was going to take us into his studio and show us a brush stroke he had worked his whole life to invent. I just looked at this guy and said to myself »This is a bunch of nonsense!¼ I realized he was intellectualizing something that, in my mind, was a spiritual thing. Painting isn't an intellectual study . . . it comes from the heart."

I've been focusing on the question of the validity and beauty of the digital brushstroke and have provided examples of that in my art. But, ultimately, all artwork is exploratory. It is all acceptable. It is all creative. It is all valid. It is all fun. It is all visual communication. It is all intriguing dialogue.

The medium is definitely not the message.

Lee Zasloff

1. JD Jarvis, On the Uniqueness of Digital Art at Digital Art Guild.

2. JD Jarvis, The Treachery of Digital Art at Digital Printing & Imaging.

3. Quoted in JD Jarvis, On the Uniqueness of Digital Art at Digital Art Guild.