

Cross Pollination - 14 Artists in Contemporary Digital Media

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Members of the Digital Art Guild from as far away as Vancouver, British Columbia were selected by curator Will Gibson to show a short portfolio of current work in this exhibit. Curator Gibson explains, "The idea was to find and show a specific body of work by these contemporary artists to create an overall picture of the state of digital two dimensional art today. The digital revolution has come to most fields of our society and the art world is no exception. Many of these artists have strong backgrounds in traditional media and have chosen to explore these new tools. Cross-pollination refers not only to the mix of traditional experience and digital tools, but also to the communication among artists in the Digital Art Guild. The range of how they approach their work gives the visitor an experience of what is possible and hopefully a glimpse of how things will continue to change in the future." (See below for a history of the Digital Art Guild.)

The Digital Art Guild: A Historic Perspective

The digital revolution that has been occurring over the past few decades has brought a new medium to art. The cross-pollination between digital and traditional media is essential in order for the new medium to flourish. In the following paragraphs, a brief history of The Digital Art Guild and its most direct precursor organizations will show how local efforts are succeeding in fusing digital media into the larger community of fine art.

While a number of individuals were creating digital graphics nearly as long as there has been computers, one of the first sustaining efforts to gather digital artists together in San Diego was made by Bob Harrison and Larry Kelly when they organized the San Diego Photoshop User Group (SDPUG) in 1997. No more than a dozen folks, attempting to help each other through the basics of digital imaging, attended the first several monthly meetings. At that stage of development, cross-pollination was limited mostly to computer geeks and photographers. The principal emphasis of the SDPUG has been the sharing of knowledge and expertise in digital imaging but its scope has increased well beyond the basic techniques to include show opportunities, job opportunities and the sharing the knowledge of many new software programs. The SDPUG has grown to become the largest organization of its type in San Diego with over 4000 members under the leadership of Stephen Burns since 1999.

In another area of San Diego, the approximately 100 members of the North County Photographic Society (NCPS) in 1998 may have had five individuals that would use the words digital and photography in the same sentence. There were efforts, notably by James Sanders, to help photographers think about how to get their photographs onto web sites and create panoramas from multiple images but most folks shunned the digital (read "dark") side. Interest grew however and the Digital Imaging Special Interest Group was formed by Jim Respass in February 1999. The word spread quickly through the larger community of folks interested in displaying digital works and, within a year, the membership of what then became Digital Imagination grew to over 200.

Interest in digital imaging was increasing exponentially in the areas of photography and graphics, and it was also attracting a growing number of "traditional" artists. There was a need for a new type of organization; one that would foster cross fertilization and advance the concept of digital fine art while promoting public interest and knowledge about the medium. The Digital Art Guild (DAG) was officially formed in June 2003 when Don Garrett, Jr., Stephen Burns, Tiger Lee, Joe Nalven and Jim Respass purchased the domain name, digitalartguild.com. News of the formation of DAG was disseminated with great networking help from SDPUG, Digital Imagination, the Museum of Computer Art, the Yahoo Digital-Fineart list and more, reaching international attention.

The foremost effort of DAG has been sponsoring and promoting exhibitions that feature digital media. Within the first month, an all-digital exhibition entitled "Fusion: Art and the Computer Revolution" was organized by Joe Nalven and presented at the San Diego Center for the Moving Arts. That was the first of many exhibitions sponsored by DAG, which included the International Digital Fine Art Exhibition at the San Diego Art Institute - Museum of the Living Artist in 2006. Under the nominal leadership of Renata Spiazzi, Joe Nalven and Jim Respass, DAG has grown to more than 400 local, national and international members. The webzine, found at digitalartguild.com, has kept a wide audience in touch with current thinking and developments in digital fine art. While the computers are humming in the background, it is estimated that at present much more than half of the membership has training in traditional arts media. The exhibition, Cross-Pollination: 14 Contemporary Artists in Digital Media represents the next stage in the ongoing maturation of DAG and its members. This show, organized and curated by Will Gibson asks the artists to present a body of work. A greater depth of personal exploration and effort is required to create a series of pieces that are tied together thematically and technically. It demonstrates the confidence that each artist has gained to get well beyond the technical elements of their medium and into the realm of fine art.

The hybrid vigor of the current generation of artists is being strengthened by the addition of digital media into the gene pool of fine art. The current exhibition gives fine examples of that ongoing process.

James G. Respass
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Note: Heterosis, or hybrid vigor implies that cross-pollination or crossbreeding can frequently result in an organism that is superior to its parents. While these terms have been used most specifically in genetics, referring to improved crop production and livestock by out breeding, the ideas, by analogy can refer to any number of human endeavors including the field of fine art.