

Painting in a Digital World: I Told You So

Over the past 10 years, the proportion of painters who use computers in their work has been rising, and rising dramatically. They may not all be expert users, and they probably know next to nothing about digital art or its origins, and nothing at all about its pioneer artists. They will not have heard of SIGGRAPH. They read Frieze. They probably outnumber hardcore digital artists by a factor of 50 to one. So if we are to speak of the way things are going in “digital art,” they are part of the picture.

In the 1990s, it was different. Only a handful of galleries (specialist digital art galleries) exhibited inkjet prints as fine art. Today it is hard to find a leading gallery that does not show inkjet prints or photos (digital, of course) mounted on aluminum. Art fairs are full of video projections, sound pieces, and installations that in one way or another are digital. Put simply, the landscape has altered. It is now overpopulated with digital users. If you are a painter who went digital all those years ago when it was cold out there, you can unlock the door. You are not alone.

A comparison with photography may be forced, but it is worth considering. The speed of the digital take-over has been extraordinary. Only a few months ago, 60 percent of the shelf space in Jessops, the major London camera chain, was devoted to digital cameras. By Christmas last year, it was 100 percent. To buy an old-style SLR camera, you now have to go to the branch that sells “classic” equipment. The explanations for this are well known: the ubiquity of camera phones, the booming sales of digital SLRs, the low cost of printers and print facilities. But bear in mind that many professionals have adamantly rejected digital photography until quite recently. They opposed it both on principle and because of its technical shortcomings. They were worried that their hard-won skills would count for nothing. In fact what seems to have happened is that while the technology has changed, and the number of photographs taken has skyrocketed, the most important factors remain much the same as before: a good eye, a good idea, patience, luck.

What then of painting? Is it destined to go digital? Would this happen universally, decade by decade, or rapidly? Would the art form somehow change completely yet remain the same underneath? And what role should the digital art community play (exhibitors at the SIGGRAPH Art Gallery, for example)? Or does it no longer make sense to speak of this as a community, or as a group capable of adapting to new circumstances?

A decade ago, digital art shows were given subtitles like “the art of the future” or “beyond painting.” Traditional painting hardly got a mention except as a has-been technology. It was there as the ghost, the bourgeois art form, non-interactive, unresponsive to the new customer who expected a piece of art to do something, something

like say hello. The curator of new media will casually mention that painting is “over” as if it were a given among the digerati. Here is a phrase from the SIGGRAPH 2005 Electronic Art and Animation Catalog: “... the now-weary exertions of the 20th century’s picture plane.” Yet the pot-pourri of post-modernist styles suggests otherwise. That concept of progress in art, of one phase superseding another, whether tired or not – that’s history. So “new media” is on a somewhat anachronistic track: a one-way track. No going back! No mixing! It’s all historically determined! Goodbye non-interactive art! You’re exhausted! Any attempt to integrate, to reconcile the disciplines of that wretched, tired-out 2D picture-plane, is doomed. It is just new tech trying to look like old tech. It’s time to put those paints away.

Well, no, it isn’t. Perhaps the issues are really tolerance, acceptance, recognition of a new diversity in the use of digital tools, liberating so-called “digital art” from its monotonous futurology. Now the possibilities may lie as much in hybrid formats (and yes, digital prints may be part of this) that bridge the gap with mainstream artists. It means admitting that “digital art” may not be the most advanced kind of art. For artists who are as enthusiastic about new software as they are about “traditional” art, this intermediate territory is fascinating, but it is curiously unacknowledged by commentators. Recent anthologies of net art, virtual art, interactive art, have been intent on defining formats that are exclusively digital. They don’t mention how far digital tools have infiltrated mainstream art. They don’t mention that “regular” artists tend to by-pass the “digital art” community. It is as if the writers all take the same view, that painting, installation, and video are each in their various ways tapped out, and the only new, the only cuttingly subversive, initiatives are coming from narrowly defined digital specialists. There is no mention of the prevalence of video installation, nor of the current resurgence of painting, of its integration with digital ways of seeing. Actually, sometimes they don’t mention “digital painting” either. Perhaps they mean to say that it doesn’t exist.

To be fair, at the moment it is not clear what “digital painting” means, or might mean in the future, or indeed whether it represents anything more than a sub-culture that can be justifiably ignored. To be a plausible category, it should at least be a breakaway category, distinct from the parent. Is an inkjet print a digital painting or a print? Does this matter? Well, it could. The logic behind “new technology equals new art form” used to sound invincible. Yes, the art you make with these computers will be different, significantly different. All the fundamentals will shift about as artificial intelligence, interactivity, virtual presence, the net, come into play. Just wait! A new breed of artist will be at the controls, and the trad painters will disappear the way stonemasons disappeared once sculpture decided to get modern. Painting is yesterday. So the last thing that you would expect,

or want if you had just given up your studio, would be a resurgence of painting smartened up with a combination of clever software, brilliant printers, cheap projectors, and fearlessly ambitious young artists. The newcomers are open-minded. They simply circumvent the born-again ideology of the digital purists, all that hot air about the New Art. There is no contradiction between an “old” format and a “new” processing device. There is nothing wrong in working with fake paint at the same time as real paint. Life is like this now. Instead of a pack of slides, you carry the slides in the iPod. It’s a change, but maybe not a revolution.

Art stores have been stocking inkjet papers for some years, but the shelf space for “traditional materials” has not been giving way to boxes of software. All the indications suggest that there will be no outright take-over. “Physical painting” and “digital painting” are destined to co-exist. For the present, you will not have to track down a “classic art” store to get hold of that cadmium red. But in the context of a digital art show you can still feel this invisible barrier. It is like an inhibition, a reflex that makes you clam up, stifling a spontaneous response. (“I can’t say I like this till I have checked through the technical statement; it may just be a new filter.”) It is as if what is good, bad, indifferent here has to be for reasons quite different from the reasons we apply in a “traditional” gallery (any gallery not part of a computer conference, or an art-of-the-future show). But now we can come across superb pieces in regular art shows that don’t parade their digital credentials (that’s background) even though these pieces could not exist without the digital controllers. Leo Villarreal’s light environments are one example. The digital category no longer makes much sense, or only a perverse sense, where digital art aspires to be real art, and real art aspires to be digital. It is confusing, to say the least. It also discourages the “mainstream” artist with real enthusiasm for the digital from getting involved.

New “mainstream” critics now breezily announce that we are beyond the phase where computer art was just about psychedelic patterns; they single out painters who manipulate software like real artists should, artists fluent and at ease with the medium. It is now just another technique. For those who were making digital pieces 20 or 30 years ago the hard way, amidst skeptical colleagues in the painting world proper, this may be hard to take. Painters fresh out of college can now scan, process, print, paint, project video imagery without any technical obstacles. The road is open. Yet there is no aesthetic law that says that overcoming difficulty is itself a virtue, and no law that says doing it first means doing it best.

Certainly, it is worth setting the record straight, and making sure the past decades of extraordinary effort are not forgotten. But the old stereotypes that kept digital art afloat no longer fit. Some artists probably thought they never did fit and felt embarrassed about the hype and the uncritical attention given to what in other contexts would never get past the door. But these artists initially had to work on their own, so they liked the company, the acceptance, the feeling of being part of the club, being in the vanguard. They got to live in the future while their neighbours lived in the past.

No longer can you put digital (avant-garde, the future, the edge) on one side, and painting (traditional, over) on the other and just leave it at that. Some critics have noticed a growing tendency in digital art to look back, not just with retro styles and personal family histories, but also by documenting the pioneering days of digital art itself, booking its berth

in the museum. Meanwhile, it is the painters, the installation artists, who have turned their attention to the future. Theories? Well, here is one: perhaps the deepest impact of computer graphics will only be felt once the mainstream has absorbed it. Digital art will dissolve away as a category. Painting will continue.

What made digital art distinctive 10 years ago (sending a jpeg through “cyberspace”) no longer makes it distinctive. It is time to drop the special pleading, as if this art is so advanced that it needs some sort of technical manual for the non-expert to get hold of the idea. The “technical statement” (still obligatory in a SIGGRAPH Art Gallery submission) is a legacy of the phase when computer art really was computer art, when both software and hardware were custom built. The story of the process involved in weaving the image together could be as interesting as the image itself. It was a triumph of homemade engineering. Nowadays if you say “I used Photoshop,” you are not saying anything. It would be like exhibiting a drawing and saying: “By the way, I used a 2B pencil,”

Digital art has existed in this limbo where you cannot predict whether a viewer has been reading *Computer Graphics World* or *Artforum*, or neither, but is unlikely to have read both. In an ideal world the exhibits would be self-evident, and a curator could orchestrate an exhibition to bring out similarities and contrasts, identify influences, show how one form evolved into another. But this doesn’t happen. The context is no context. The actual work on show, be it an Epson print or an immersive interactive sound piece, may need some helpful explanation. It doesn’t, so to speak, work on its own. In a normal gallery context the viewer should be able to get the point in a glimpse. This assumes they are aware of the milieu, pick up the subliminal signals, the codes in the gallery décor, or lack of décor. They see “the piece.” They like it, they don’t like it, they shrug, they look at it again, they leave. Enough said. A week, a month later they can read a review and reflect on what they missed. Digital art is not like that. It is rarely reviewed, or commented on with the cold eye of the critic. Most of what is written is gently supportive and uncritical. It is written by the artists themselves.

Put crudely, up to now “digital art” has not had to face up to the more or less public scrutiny of art in the gallery. It exists in a protected zone, where its importance, or self-importance, does not have to endure the real test. This is fair enough, in that just to make something happen required a lot of time, expertise, and money, all of which was much more possible if you had some sort of academic position. Digital art has marked itself off as being “different.” True, there have been prestigious shows where digital art seems to be endorsed by major museums, and there have been authoritative books parceling out the sub-categories. These tend to uphold a segregation policy: an official “new media” room customized for “edge” art, for example. It suggests a peculiar consensus. Is painting really “over?” How long can an art form be an edge form? Who is weary of what? Can’t we have painting, digital art, and other formats all mixed together without divisive put-downs?

Perhaps this is asking too much, and for some time to come “digital art” will continue with its traditions of splendid isolation. Alongside the technical statement runs the “artist’s” statement. The “piece” becomes something other than a row of wired up boxes in a dark space, something hanging on the wall. The user is told it is a cultural investigation into, let’s see ... global simultaneity ... the disembodied mind ...

synaesthesia. A decade ago, an exchange of “real time” video across thousands of miles (“here is the sky outside my window. Now show me the sky outside yours.”) was right there on the edge, worthy of at least a paragraph of speculation about “telepresence.”

There is this latent inferiority complex of an earlier phase, when computer art really was computer art. It was difficult to get it taken seriously. It needed to demonstrate that there was more to it than a few tricks with an electric spirograph. There had to be Philosophy, and a Position about the World. So the Artist has Something to Say. This is Content. The Artist programs this into the circuitry, and it wafts through the machine and “emerges” (a favourite term, like it’s consciousness) as Art. This is not the way art normally happens except in student projects up for assessment: here’s the project brief, here’s the technical stuff. As long as this particular stereotype persists, “digital” shows will look just a little irrelevant, and remain unnoticed by those making the running in the larger art worlds.

This essay began by noting the quiet invasion of the digital into painting – by the back door you might say. Sooner or later, the presence of so many “computer literate” artists (another phrase fast becoming redundant) will have to be acknowledged amongst the community of digital artists. Does this community still hang together? Perhaps it will soon disperse, as every artist becomes in effect a digital artist, if only by sending that jpeg. Perhaps splinter groups will continue, becoming impenetrably academic, disappearing into art theory, into PhD research.

The complex social mechanism we casually describe as the “art world” is meanwhile making its own adjustments. In comparison, the community of interests clustered around the SIGGRAPH Art Gallery, ISEA, Ars Electronica, the Digital Salon, are small players. It is hard to imagine how digital art could have got off the ground at all without these and similar focal points, without the dedicated efforts of so many individuals. Major galleries now routinely present installations that a few years ago would have turned up as prototypes in digital shows – relatively shabby shows without any of the social grooming, white cavernous spaces, and polished concrete floors. The “proper” galleries have a lot more muscle than any digital art organization, and they can cream off the talent at will.

Put this way, it sounds unfair: inventors being dumped while someone else runs off with all the credit and the rewards. But there could be a bright side too. Sooner or later, there just have to be some large-scale exhibitions that make a fair assessment of how computers came to be used by artists, how several trails were laid, how some led nowhere, how the mainstream picked up the scent here and there. If confined to painting in all its forms, such exhibitions would work much better if they bridged the divisions between digital and non-digital, expert and non-expert user, and steered clear of the idea of this all being “machine art.”

In art school libraries “digital art” sometimes turns up alongside drawing techniques, sometimes next to ships and planes under machines, but never, it seems, just as art in its own right. This has to change, and it surely won’t be long before a handful of art stars will be picked out from the digital shows, and the whole enterprise will become more prestigious, absorbed into the culture of art fairs where here and there a “piece” will become top-class art merchandise. In turn, this will encourage software developers to make paint software that caters to the more ambitious user.

At the moment, the target user is the Sunday Painter, and the demos don’t exactly stretch the horizons. Someone has to wake up and produce software for the artist that does the job the way Photoshop does the job for the designer (that is to say, for the professional, demanding designer). Would this mean swapping the easy-going, open, democratic, amateurish, cozy society of current digital art for the snobby, exclusive, cutthroat world of corporate-scale galleries? That’s the problem.