

Objects and Images

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Digital Media of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

by

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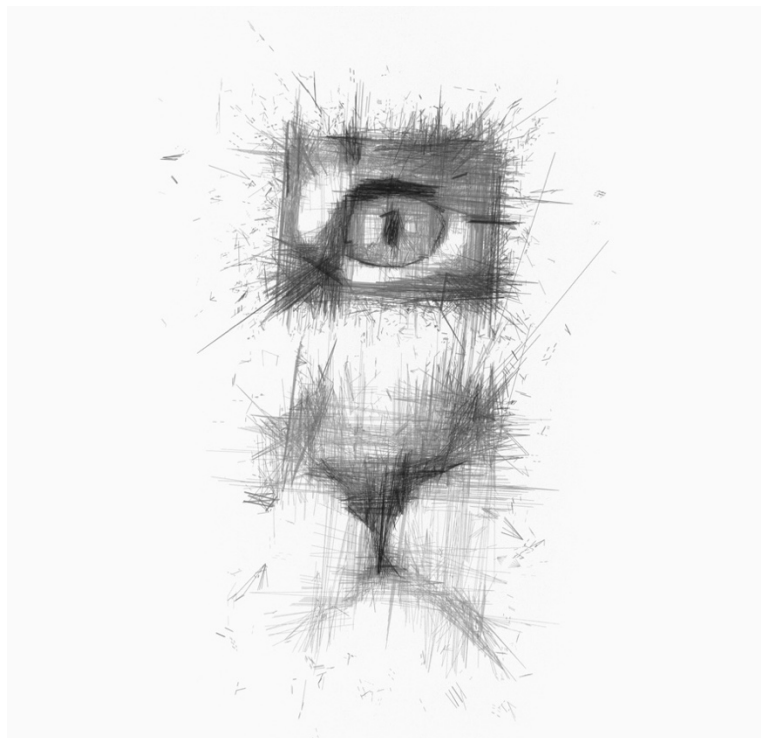
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Abstract

My work often involves photographic source material as well as surrealistic forms. Two primary influences, René Magritte and Gerhard Richter, can be seen as at odds with each other in many respects. Drawing parallels and distinctions, I explore relationships in the work of Magritte, Richter and myself.

Background

Before attending RISD I was focused on drawing with standard materials like graphite and paper, and often using photos as source material. At RISD I shifted to developing software to create the pictures. I used genetic programming techniques to design a framework that generated picture-making algorithms automatically. I was intrigued by the idea that the internal workings of these algorithms would be completely unknown. They developed through a process that modeled evolution, and like biological organisms they were complex, irrational and mysterious. Using the framework I guided the development of the algorithms by regularly intervening to select ones that made interesting pictures and allowing them to procreate to produce the next generation. An individual algorithm would reproduce “sexually” by breaking off branches of its tree-like structure and trading with other individuals.



Jack Lovell, digital image created by picture-making software, 2013

I was drawn to the mystery of the hidden code, but the resulting pictures did not sufficiently communicate this mystery. The mystery was hidden in the technical engineering layer and was not visible to viewers of the resulting pictures.

Drawing, both through the computer and by hand, is a way to interact with the photo. But the photo can also be an oppressive influence on the picture. The image in the photo is already complete. Even if the visual recording was damaged by faulty exposure or development, this feels like just as much a part of the artifact that must be faithfully copied in the drawing or painting. There is a compulsion to stay with the reality of the photo and not deviate. But then why am I alive if I'm creating nothing? So the question for me becomes: how do I invent something new in a picture if I'm working within the gravitational pull of photography?

In this paper I reevaluate my attraction to photographs and their reproduction by hand, which I tried to emulate with the computer. Gerhard Richter and René Magritte are both representational painters, and although their output is quite different, comparison yields similarities as well. In what follows I analyze some different aspects of their work.

Source Material

In their pictures both Magritte and Richter employ everyday objects and images. Magritte "aimed at neutrality and found it in the uniformity of standard objects – silver harness bells...a piece of turned wood...a tailor's dummy, an apple, a bowler hat."¹ He "searched for backgrounds that were as neutral or – to use a favorite word of his – as indifferent as possible and found them on picture postcards, illustrations from the Larousse dictionary, children's illustrated books, medical manuals."² He used "only familiar objects and traditional perspective."³

Richter sources his images from his "Atlas," an "ever-expanding compendium...ranging from personal snapshots to celebrity glam-shots, from advertisements to pornography, landscape postcards to photographs of concentration camps."⁴ Richter collects photographs, "Not 'art' photographs, but ones taken by lay people, or by ordinary newspaper photographers."⁵ He seeks the accidental and unpretentious in the "anonymous, uncontrived aspect of snapshots—the way the camera automatically gathers in information irrelevant to the author's intention."⁶

Both painters proclaim allegiance to the commonplace, standard, familiar, unremarkable, anonymous, generic, ordinary and uniform, but they differ in their use of these ideas. Richter uses photographic recordings of real life, the real world, and real human activity. They show

¹ Whitfield, 28

² Ibid

³ Dubnick, 409

⁴ Guardian staff reporter. "Grand Illusion." *The Guardian*, *The Guardian*, 24 Apr. 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/apr/25/gerhard-richter-painting>.

⁵ Richter, *Daily Practice*, 22

⁶ Laxton, 788

people in motion and at the beach, aerial views of cities, and warplanes in the midst of a bombing run.



Gerhard Richter, *Woman with Child (Beach)*, 1965, oil on canvas, 130×110 cm



Gerhard Richter, *Bombers*, 1963, oil on canvas, 130×180 cm

These source images already show a complete, coherent reality-scene before Richter starts to paint. Richter then creates a picture that is a faithful reproduction of the source, allowing the photo to dictate where objects are positioned, what they are doing, how they feel, how they are lit, and what environment they appear in. Faithfulness to the source includes artifacts and effects specific to the technical nature of photography itself, including bloom, depth of field blurring and overexposed blown-out areas. The source is the photograph itself. The recorded scene in the photo is only one aspect of the subject. For Richter we might call the photograph the “sitter.”

Magritte depicts everyday, familiar objects. Although he uses photography as reference material, his pictures are not concerned with remaining faithful to the photographic source. The photo is

merely a useful expedient in producing the picture. However, Magritte is just as preoccupied with “images” as Richter. His pictures show images as objects in space.



René Magritte, *The Memoirs of a Saint*, 1960, oil on canvas, 80×100 cm

In my work I use everyday objects and images as source material, including stock images, which I've had extensive contact with as a graphic designer. I also use personal and family photographs, friends' snapshots, found photos, and photos from common sources such as media, magazines, romance novels, soap operas, movies and the internet. I choose these sources because of an instinct to move away from the emotional charge and grandiosity of Romanticism or Impressionism. In *Arrays* the use of stock images of tangible objects, shown duplicated in diagonal rows which run along two perpendicular axes, create coincidental overlaps which could be interpreted as referencing the interchangeability of the objects, any of which can be bought. The inclusion of miniature people, fresh salmon ready to be cooked, and a naturalist's bird nest specimen seem to take cherished concepts such as the human body, domesticity, family and

nature, and juxtapose them haphazardly with photographed commodities and products such as fortune cookies, rolls of film, plastic straws, light bulbs, Windex, disposable razors and pushpins.



Jack Lovell, *Arrays*, 2008, colored pencil on paper, 60×30 in.



Jack Lovell, *Arrays* (detail)

Style, Intervention

Both Magritte and Richter have strong views on “style.” Richter disavows style wholesale: “I like everything that has no style: dictionaries, photographs, nature, myself and my paintings. (Because style is violence, and I am not violent.)”⁷ which supports his use of photography: “The photograph is the most perfect picture...devoid of style.”⁸ Magritte indicates that style should not be a primary concern: “The research carried out by most modern painters is the result of a grave mistake: they wish to determine the style of a painting a priori.”⁹ Style should instead follow the function of the picture. Magritte thinks about the picture as having an active function: to stimulate what he calls the “aesthetic sensation” or “aesthetic emotion,” and any style should develop only in the service of this function.

Virtuosity is for idiots (in the pathological sense). The real job is in the layout, the choice of line, shape and colour, which will automatically trigger aesthetic sensations, the picture’s *raison d’être*.¹⁰

Magritte rejects style on the level where paint is applied by the hand to create the representation:

I always try to make sure that the actual painting isn’t noticed, that it is as little visible as possible. I work rather like the sort of writer who tries to find the simplest tone, who

⁷ Richter, *Daily Practice*, 35

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Magritte, *Selected Writing*, 8

¹⁰ Ibid

eschews all stylistic effects, so that the only thing the reader is able to see in his work is the idea he was trying to express. So the act of painting is hidden.¹¹

In the same way that the printing press is hidden when we look at the newspaper, the painting should disappear as a mere technical step in producing the picture. Legitimate style is not in the paint application, but in the structure of what is represented in the picture. Richter meanwhile rejects composition as “a side issue. Its role in my selection of photographs is a negative one at best...the fascination of a photograph is not in its eccentric composition but in what it has to say: its information content.”¹²

Magritte’s pictures are some of the most recognizable in art today because they have a distinct style. The style occurs on the level of what is depicted: a recognizable preference to use particular types of objects, or to invent surreal forms with a particular character, or to use certain recurring strategies for recontextualizing objects, such as irregularly-framed pictures within the picture.



René Magritte, *The Alphabet of Revelations*, 1929, oil on canvas, 54.3×73.3 cm



René Magritte, *The Six Elements*, 1929, oil on canvas, 73×99.9 cm

¹¹ Pierre Descargues, 'René Magritte: Faire la peinture qui se remarque le moins possible', *Tribune de Lausanne* (15 January 1967). Reprinted in Magritte, *Ecrits*, p. 660. (qtd in Whitfield 28)

¹² Richter, *Daily Practice*, 22

Richter's style on the other hand occurs precisely on the level of the paint as applied to canvas. But he too avoids the "virtuosity" that Magritte detests by hiding his brushwork through blurring and with his well-known technique of dragging the paint across the surface of the canvas as a final move to blur the entire picture uniformly.

I blur things to make everything equally important and equally unimportant. I blur things so that they do not look artistic or craftsmanlike but technological, smooth and perfect. I blur things to make all the parts a closer fit. Perhaps I also blur out the excess of unimportant information.¹³

In my work I attempt to combine elements of both Richter's and Magritte's approach to style. In *Bent Shape* and *Flowers* images fill distinct shapes. The style in these images occurs on the level of the masking, which happens in the computer before the image is reproduced by hand. The aspects where style enters these pieces is in the selection of images and the shapes containing them. Like Richter and Magritte I avoid style on the level of the rendering - the way materials are applied by hand to create a representation. I'm interested in treating "imagery" as a material in itself, which seems to have been laid down in one stroke. I render the images by hand because like Richter I feel that "even when I paint a straightforward copy, – something new creeps in, whether I want it to or not: something that even I don't really grasp."¹⁴ This "something new" is what was missing in my picture-making software. When a human being creates an image, even a precise and faithful copy of a photograph, the image is imbued with something mysterious in the process of passing through the painter's mind.

¹³ Richter, *Daily Practice*, 37

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 24



Jack Lovell, *Bent Shape*, 2008, charcoal on paper, 28.3×22.1 in.



Jack Lovell, *Flowers*, 2017, colored pencil on paper, 21.1×19.4 in.

Why are the images contained in irregular shapes? Partly to exclude portions of the image that are uninteresting. Also to incorporate “graphic design” as another meta-material, like the images. Computer graphics has played a large role throughout my life and my sensibilities are marked by the computer’s ability to deal with imagery as a material in itself. Much work in Photoshop involves using the brush tool and masks to paint with a virtual substance consisting of imagery. The shapes also crop the images in a way that contravenes the depicted depth in the image, by cutting off the image across a contour that is undulating into and out of the imaginary depth of the picture. The 2D crop lives in the picture plane, and it is ignorant of the image we see inside, or behind, or through it. But in working with the shape to get it to feel right, even if to simply remove unwanted areas, a human element “creeps in.” This human element enters through a highly mediated process, passing through the computer’s interfaces of the mouse, tablet and keyboard, through a projector, onto the traditional physical material of the paper or canvas, and

recreated by hand with charcoal or paint. The cutting off of the image along an interesting topographic portion such as a protrusion (e.g. a nose or cheek) or concavity (e.g. a gap between flower petals revealing a glimpse of vast space beneath full of green stems rising up from the depths) creates an abstraction at the very edge of the shape, where the painter, making marks with a brush or pencil, must transition abruptly from the imagined reality and 3D world of the image to the actual reality of the bare white paper. But the transition need not be fully immediate thanks to the act of rebuilding the picture by hand. The drawing has a few moments to come to terms with itself at this edge.

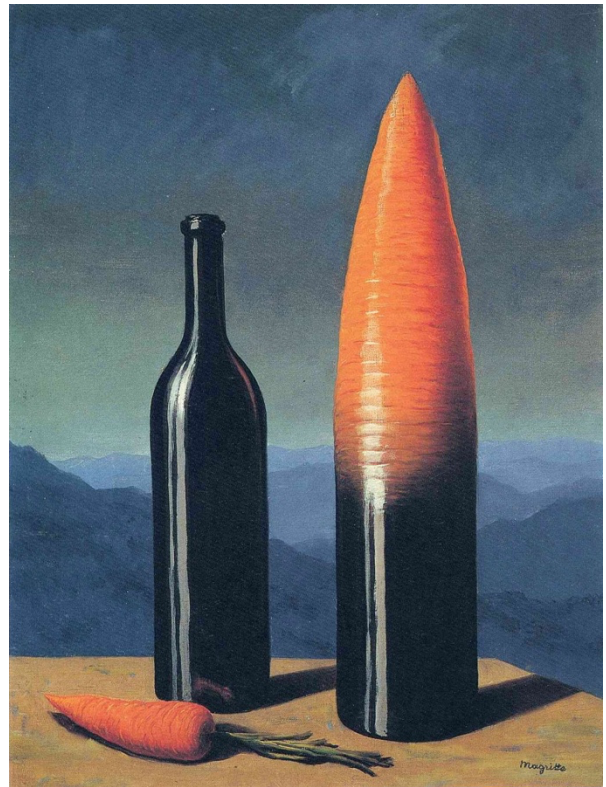
What Are the Pictures Doing?

Magritte's intentions have been expressed as a desire "to overthrow our sense of the familiar, to sabotage our habits, to put the real world on trial."¹⁵ These "habits" are our stultified perceptions of the world, conditioned by "society's preconceived ideas and predetermined good sense."¹⁶

Once we're shaken from apathy our "attention must be shifted from the trivialities of experience to its real nature."¹⁷ Magritte wants to intervene in our experience of the world and this is reflected in the way he changes reality in his pictures.



René Magritte, *The Rape*, 1934,
oil on canvas, 73×54 cm



René Magritte, *The Explanation*, 1952,
oil on canvas, 46×35 cm

¹⁵ Gablik, *Magritte*, 9

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 10

¹⁷ *Ibid*

Richter seems to evade intentionality: “he always avoids taking a position. He says Yes and No, and No and Yes, in a way that suggests he is an aesthetic cynic.”¹⁸ In contrast to Magritte, Richter expresses acceptance of an inevitable uniformity in society: “It is impossible to act or think independently and arbitrarily. This is comforting, in a way. To the individual, the collective experience of the age represents a bond – and also, in a sense, security.”¹⁹

Magritte infracts our implicit expectation that there exists a scene or reality that corresponds with the image we see. He often does this by depicting his objects situated in spaces that have reality-like depth, setting up the expectation of reality, which can then be violated to produce the “mystery.”

However, in order that this mystery be invoked, means for doing so must be found.

‘Realism’, he has said, ‘is something vulgar, ordinary; but for me, reality is not easily attained.’²⁰

Richter makes copies of photos, embraces mass media and advertising. He can be seen as surrendering his free will to an external reality that has already been translated into 2D for him by a machine. His career has been described as “a half-century-long exercise in self-negation”²¹ and “All Richter has done, since his defection to West Germany in 1961, is model how to act and think when all roads seem exhausted.”²² But elsewhere Richter expresses ideas that seem in-line

¹⁸ Richter, *Forty Years*, 288

¹⁹ Richter, *Daily Practice*, 11

²⁰ Gablik, *Magritte*, 12

²¹ <https://www.artforum.com/print/201007/gerhard-richter-26137>

²² <https://www.artforum.com/print/202009/jason-farago-84365>

with Magritte's desire to strip away something from our logic-inflected perception, and both painters reject "meaning" in a picture:

Pictures which are interpretable, and which contain a meaning, are bad pictures. A picture presents itself as the Unmanageable, the Illogical, the Meaningless. It demonstrates the endless multiplicity of aspects; it takes away our certainty, because it deprives a thing of its meaning and its name.²³

For Magritte, paintings worth being painted or looked at have no reducible meaning: they *are* a meaning.²⁴

My work involves copying photos by hand. Why do I see this as worthwhile? Magritte often declared that "For me, a reproduction is enough! Like in literature, you don't need to see a writer's manuscript to be interested in his book!"²⁵ For Magritte the idea is the thing, not the painting as an object in itself. It follows that copying an existing image by hand through a laborious time-consuming process is pointless when a machine can do it more accurately and many times over. Richter acknowledges that the act of painting is "total idiocy"²⁶ and he goes even further. He goes to the trouble of copying by hand, and then he blurs the surface with the final all-over dragging of the paint. This blur, which affirms the materiality of the paint, introduces the unpredictable chance of a singular movement in time, and creates a picture that is one of a kind. It can never be reproduced in exactly the same way. In this process I see three layers forming a kind of symmetry. First the original photograph records an image that

²³ Richter, *Daily Practice*, 35

²⁴ Gablik, *Magritte*, 12

²⁵ Magritte, *Selected Writing*, location 186

²⁶ Richter, *Daily Practice*, 78

represents a unique moment in time that exists only once and can never be recreated. Next the recorded image is reproduced by hand with a high degree of fidelity which foregrounds, by its very absurdity, the real potential to duplicate. Finally the work, which cost the painter an irreplaceable investment of life-time, is wiped out to create an image which, like the original photo, is a unique recording of an event (the unpredictable wipe) that will never exist again and can never be reproduced.

In *Tommy* I reproduce a photo from my family's collection of snapshots. In the foreground is my grandmother, whose college nickname was Tommy, in 1939 when she is 19 years old. I have included fading and a loss of definition near the left edge of the original printed photo. This effect interests me because it works on a level that disregards the depicted 3D depth. It lives in the world of the picture plane, like the shapes I use to mask images. When a painter accurately represents something it's inevitable that their mind will weave concepts into the picture, such as ideas about how the objects are shaped and how they're being illuminated. This is true of both painting from life and from a photo. But the photo is already a flat picture, and as such it offers a greater opportunity to turn off the rational mind and to stop seeing namable objects.



Jack Lovell, *Tommy*, 2019, oil on paper, 10.6×8.5 in.



Jack Lovell, *Usurpadora*, 2020, oil on canvas, 32×22 in.

The other day someone asked me what the relationship was between my life and my art. I couldn't really think of any, except that life obliges me to do something, so I paint.²⁷

Even feeding the kids is an idiotic act. From that perspective, everything is meaningless. You have to believe in the idea that it does make sense. It doesn't matter whether it is painting or working in your backyard²⁸

Magritte boldly changes reality while Richter conspicuously does not, basing his work on copies. Both painters intervene in our experience through different paths.

²⁷ Gablik, *Magritte*, 172

²⁸ Richter, *Forty Years*, 287

Magritte uses depicted space and invents surreal modifications to recontextualize familiar objects in an attempt to decouple the object from its image and from its name, in order to remind us that these things are not the same. This dissociation creates a reference to the “object” which seems to exist independently of our perception and our labels. The object becomes a nebulous entity that exists only in our mind.

Richter uses black and white photographic sources and faithful copying to celebrate nostalgia for the image of a past moment that is gone forever. He creates yearning by triggering a sense of our own memories and of time passing. Richter creates the opportunity, if we wish, to pull ourselves back from within the photo and remember that we’ve psychologically entered the scene without missing a beat.

In my work I intend to create opportunities to experience images and objects in new ways. With images masked inside shapes I create both a hole and an object in the picture. The shape is a window into a 3D space, but also an object upon which an image is printed. We can enter into the scene through the window, or imagine taking the object out of the picture and holding it in our hands. The image is both behind and in front of the picture plane, while right next door there exists a third inconsistent reality in the form of untouched paper.

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