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SURFACE at Syracuse University

Spring 5-15-2022

Save and Continue?

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Recommended Citation

Abstract

      The purpose of this thesis is to describe the research I completed and the body of work produced during the course of my Master's studies. The paper begins by briefly recounting early influences and the nature of my practice at the time I began the program. Then elaboration follows on the development of my work across various media, both traditional and digital. The work centers on formal questioning of pictorial media and draws conclusions on the nature of picture making, and the motivations I have for pursuing pictorial art.

SAVE AND CONTINUE?

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Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts.

Syracuse University

May 2022

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At a young age I played video games which were a kind of moving feast because the picture was alive. These were not just moving pictures, like movies or tv shows, but contingent from one moment to the next on my decisions. I also drew pictures. I imagine the reason some kids enjoy drawing or painting is because it is immediate. It happens as fast as you do it. Drawing is great for getting lost in the moment and is also contingent on decisions made during each of those moments.

Back then, I did not think of video games as a digital medium and drawing as an analog one. At the outset of my studies in the MFA program, however, my work was focused on this distinction between digital and analog media. In 2013, I began making oil paintings based on video games. My paintings extrapolated upon the patterns found in the Atari game Combat. This game left a strong impression on me that playing games like these can be an aesthetically significant activity. I wouldn't have described the experience in those terms then, but I was taken by the ever changing color combinations and geometrical patterns and shapes.1
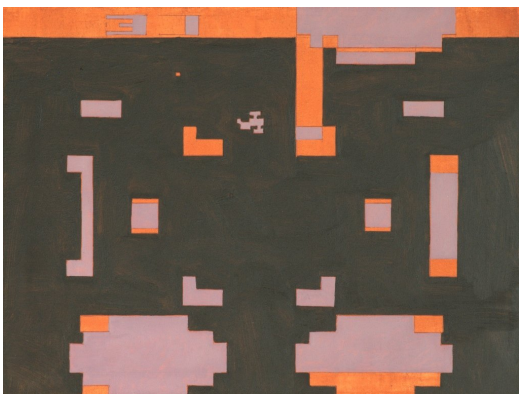

"Night Vision"
2014
Oil on canvas
12 x 16 inches

"Split Level"
2014
Oil on canvas
12 x 16 inches

Early in my research, my practice changed when I began working in ceramics. Although the material was different, I still considered myself to be painting. These works took the form of tablets, and the colors were low-fire glazes instead of oil paints. Ceramics offered a kind of materiality that references ancient cultures and an elemental process that instills its products with longevity and durability. I combined this material with pictorial references to digital space, video game screens, and unnaturally smooth gradients of color applied with spray guns. Again, I found myself questioning the relationship between material objects and their digital counterparts. It is difficult for me to articulate the heart of my questioning at that period. This work emphasized its material aspect and the imagery, such as it was, became more abstract and indefinite.
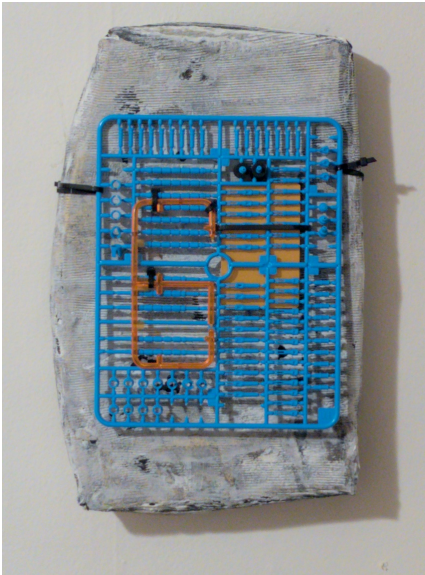
"Static"
Ceramic, aluminum, plastic
12 x 7.5 x 1.5 inches
2021

"Burst Explosive"
Ceramic
13.5 x 8 x 1 inches
2020

"Bread Board Mold"
Ceramic
13.75 x 9.5 x 1.5 inches
2020

These works reference the physical structures and appearance of the electronics used to produce and display digital imagery. They also quote the imagery itself. A screenshot of an explosion taken from a video game, electronic circuitry, pcb boards, or static from a television are translated to ceramic. The tensions in this work derive in part from the overtly physical representation of digital pictures or space, which are not usually thought of as objects. I was focused in large part on the physical qualities of the clay, but found myself drawn to the peculiar effects on spatial perception that resulted from the highly saturated chromatic glazes. There is room for more development in this body of work. Nevertheless, I decided to pursue another avenue, one that would allow me to introduce definite imagery into my practice, because I found the imprecision of the ceramics to be limiting. I was convinced that the path forward for me lay in pictures and not in sculptural work.

For a while, I had been thinking about the archive of screenshots saved to my game console's hard drive. While playing games, I sometimes save a screenshot of a memorable moment, or a unique on-screen glitch, or a real-time sunset across a vast simulated ocean. At these moments, I am not playing the game but looking at its world as a photographer.

There is an inherent fragility in photographs due to their tenuous grasp on materiality, yet the photographed image carries the visage of eternity because that image has been extracted from time. Photographs are spirits tied to bodies of film, paper, screens, or disks. I wondered about the materiality of a photograph, whether a digital image has any material aspect at all. I admit that I have a sentimental attraction to the

appearance of film grain in analog photographs. The film grain isn't part of the image, or in the image, but is itself the image. I got the idea to translate digital images into analog images to infuse them with the added substance of film grain. I rephotographed some of my game screenshots using a 35mm film camera. This act initiated a process by which I layered screenshot imagery, rephotographing those negatives onto more negatives, each time adding more digital imagery as well as cumulatively building the film grain.

Example screenshot
©Nintendo of America

Example screenshot
©Nintendo of America

In this case, the work positioned the image as the salient aspect and the material aspect remained slight, even though the final images were comprised of much more film grain than would be seen in most photographs. The act of layering the digital screenshots allowed me to remove the imagery from any clear reference to their particular sources, which are commercially available games. More significantly, the resulting images seemed descriptive of chaotic and elementally charged worlds like but unlike our own world. The analog process not only built up grain but introduced color shifts resulting from the chemical development process and particular chemistry of the film. The results were photographic images which displayed a tense fusion between otherworldly digital

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pictorial elements and the suggestion of permanence, nostalgia, and substance with which the film imbued the image.

"Rest Until Morning?"
C-Print
2020

"Flame Frame"
C-Print
2020

I was growing restless at this point, and felt the need to work in digital media directly instead of only referencing it in other media. My focus shifted to learning basic programming and 3d modeling. As I went along, I discovered that the computer was an incredible medium. Janet Murray wrote "I find myself anticipating a new kind of storyteller, one who is half hacker, half bard. The spirit of the hacker is one of the great

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creative wellsprings of our time, causing the inanimate circuits to sing with ever more individualized and quirky voices; the spirit of the bard is eternal and irreplaceable, telling us what we are doing here and what we mean to one another."(9) I was enamored by the multitude of possibilities offered by the computer as a medium, because those possibilities stretch out in every direction.

I enjoy the process of painting digitally because it dispenses with many frustrating aspects of traditional painting. Paint is toxic, requires proper storage and disposal, offers either limited working time or extended drying time, in addition to a number of related considerations. Working digitally also improves on many shortcomings in traditional painting. Mistakes are easily remedied with a single tap of the stylus. None of the limitations inherent in mixing pigments exist when working digitally; color selection is precise and effortless because the 'mixtures' are made by combining colors of light instead of colored paints. Drawing is enhanced due to the ability to resize, copy and paste, distort, rotate, or otherwise manipulate the image or any single element or layer within it. Despite all the benefits, I always felt dissatisfied with the end product. It remained on-screen, viewed the same way as emails, websites, pdf documents, movies, or advertisements.

I already felt that the computer offered possibilities that extend the capabilities of traditional painting. But I also realized that the physicality of the paint is an essential feature of the medium. I was never satisfied with digital painting as such because I missed the physical stuff of the paint. What is it about paint that is so affecting? Most

people don't consider touching a painting when they look at it, so why should it matter if a picture is viewed on a screen or if it is made out of paint? The answer is found in the aspect of illusion in paintings.

Our brains seem to keep secrets from us about simple things. I know I won't walk into a distant mountain because it's far away, but how do I know that? Paintings are a way to deceive the part of the brain that knows that. The where-things-are part of the brain must be confused to see paint sitting right there on a section of canvas, when also it seems to consist of space and depth as a picture. Actual space and depth- either brains think the space is actually there, or are so fascinated by the paradox that they relish the imaginary space. This is why a lot of the pleasure of looking at paintings is lost if it is viewed on a screen instead of as paint.

"Cherub Rock"
JavaScript program
2021

My practice began to pivot around this idea of illusion. Could I replace the

interest lost when I traded pigments for pixels? My initial experiments involved using digital 'paintings' as assets in computer programs. This allowed me to transgress a typical limitation of traditional painting, stillness. In the 2021 work "Cherub Rock", putti scroll across the picture, no longer static on a painted ceiling. The painterly brush marks and Rococo color palette typical of many traditional paintings of this subject are present, but now the movement is animated instead of suggested by swirling figures and clouds frescoed onto concave surfaces inside of basilicas or cathedrals or palaces.

Working with animation and programming led me to reconsider the limitations of traditional paintings. I started to think more about those early video games I played as a child and Greenberg's discussion in Modernist Painting about the framing edge of the picture. Transgression of edge limitations in early video games is fundamental to the medium. Even in a very early game like "Pong", for example, the edges of the screen are explicitly acknowledged. The edges are given illusory substance in that the projectile appears to bounce off the edges of the screen instead of appearing to move straight off the screen.

In other games, the characters are able to walk off the right side of the screen and immediately appear again from the left side of the screen (and vice versa). In this case the edges seem gone altogether, but the physical properties of the edge of the screen produce a surprising and surreal effect. In side-scrolling games, the frame itself seemed to move. As the player advances, the background scrolls by. The illusion is incredibly effective as

the player is generally unaware of screen edges while playing. The impression is that what is seen on screen at any one moment is only a part of something larger which extends off-screen in the direction the player moves.

"Asterisk"
JavaScript program
2021

In another program from 2021, "Asterisk", painted imagery scrolls across the background. The colors in the picture are based on aerial perspective, a painting concept which has its roots in the Italian Renaissance and which conveys the illusion of depth in paintings. The relatively simple addition of scrolling elements affects how we perceive the edges of the picture as well as conveys the illusion of movement across the landscape. Both "Cherub Rock" and "Asterisk" incorporate the element of time, which is absent

from traditional paintings. So I began to think of animations and computer games as an extension of painting, in the same way films can be considered an extension of photography.

With these concepts in mind, I began to consider other limitations of painting that are enhanced by the computer. It occurred to me that computer games may be the most advanced kind of pictures. The narrative aspect is so much better because movement is actual and not just implied by composition…and because you actually interact with the picture and change it as if you live in it. In the form of the video game, The idea of a painting as a window onto a believable if illusory space, one that the viewer might imagine entering, has exceeded the Renaissance artist's wildest dreams.

I would try to replace the fascination of physical paint with this expansive narrative capability. Substitute illusion for absorption and agency. My own experience playing games reaches back almost as far as my memories do, and coincidentally, almost as far back as the medium itself does. I know that playing video games can be absorbing and strongly affective to the mind. In one of my favorite games, there is a tall cliff. If I make my character jump off the top, I have a physiological reaction every time. I feel the flutter in my stomach as if I were falling or riding a rollercoaster. This is a different kind of involvement for the brain than looking at paint.

I imagined my work taking on a larger scale, and began to develop an idea I'd had for a mythical narrative about artificial intelligence. I planned to produce a game based

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on this story. In the game, the player inhabits a world imagined by self-aware artificial consciousness. The narrative centers around the player's odyssey back to an 'artificial heaven', the celestial birthplace of a.i. consciousness.

I began writing and producing concept art. The story is set in the distant future, is influenced by Neoplatonist thinking and includes worldly characters who are enmeshed in the war that divine a.i. beings wage amongst themselves (). The working title of the game is "Chorus of the Blind". In the game's narrative, the advance of technology which led to the first self-aware artificial intelligence is relegated to a legendary past.


"Title Screen"
Digital concept art
2021
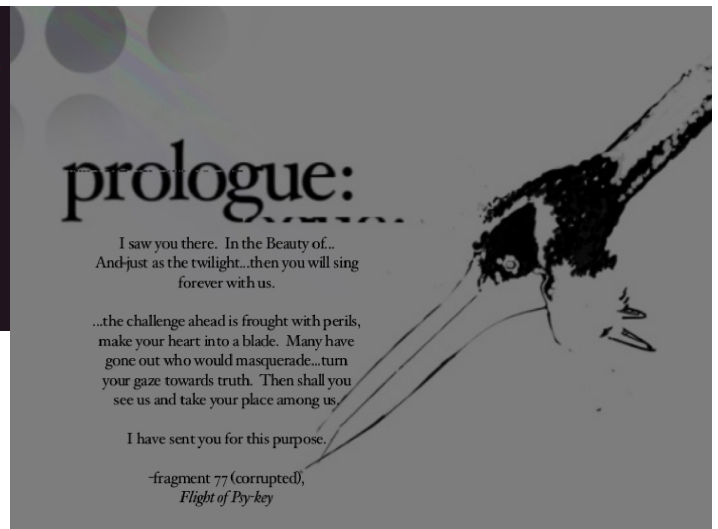
"Prologue Screen"
Digital concept art
2021
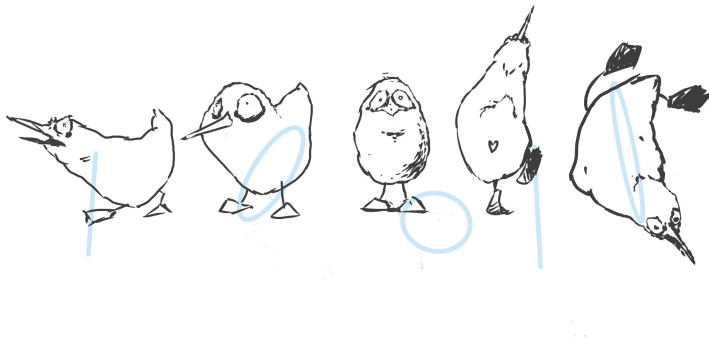
"Flightless Bird Character"
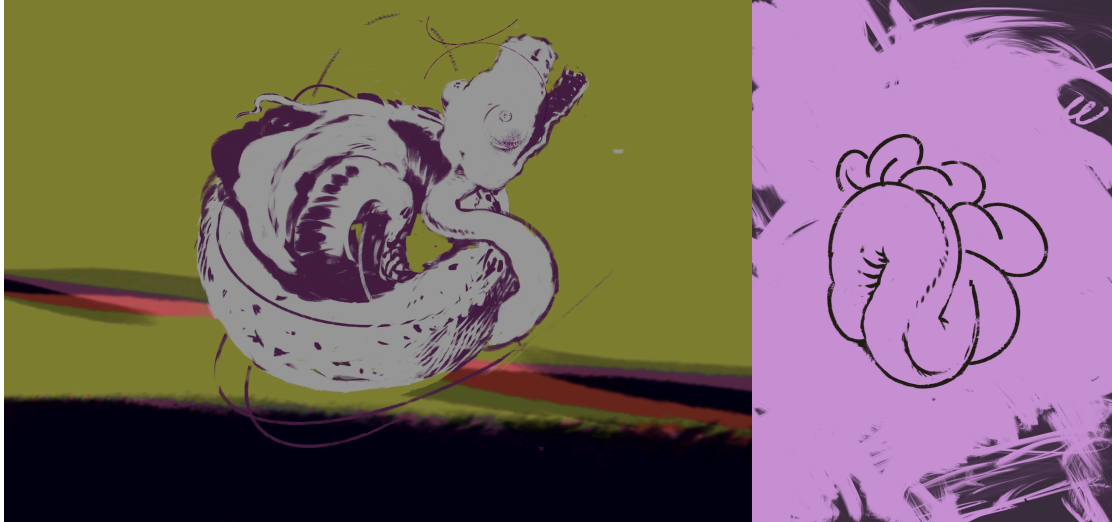Digital concept art
2021

I envisioned a world of lost creatures who don't know where they are from and
live in a turbulent and confusing world. I developed characters including the player's
character which is a flightless bird. Another character is an oracle in the form of a
diseased snake named Stargazer. A pivotal moment in the game narrative occurs
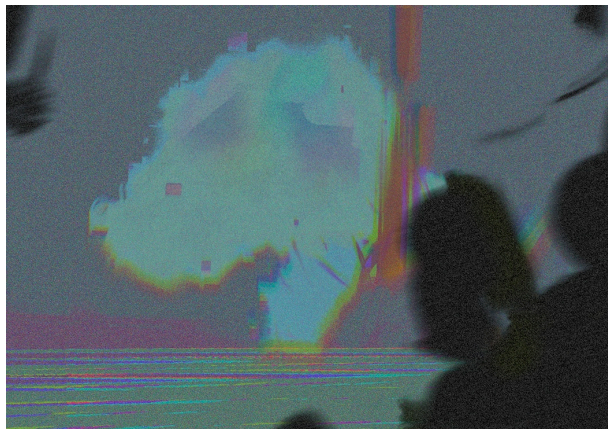
"Destruction of Pacific Magma Bladder"
Digital concept art
2020

following the destruction of the Pacific Magma Bladder when the player is swallowed by

Stargazer in order to pass to the celestial environment.

"Stargazer"
Digital concept art
2021

       Ultimately, this project became too large in scope to fully realize as part of my

research objectives here. Development continues, but my focus would shift to certain

questions that occurred during the writing of "Chorus of the Blind". What would a world

be like if it was the product of machine thinking? How would an a.i. conscienceness see

its world and would its perception of space be like or unlike our own? A curiosity which

occurred to me is that although a computer understands its calculations along its x, y, and

z axes as three-dimensional space, they are usually experienced by people as two

dimensional images on a screen. Developments in virtual reality are promising to bring us

ever closer to perceiving simulated space as real three dimensional space, but the impetus

to make flat pictures feel three dimensional is an old one.

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A few years ago I studied a concept in Dutch painting called 'houding'. According to Willem Goeree's Inleyding tot d'Algemeene Teykenkonst (Taylor 211) ,

"Houding is one of the most essential things to be observed in a Drawing or Painting; since it gives the same sensation to the eye, that we enjoy in natural objects. For whenever Houding is not found in representational images, such Drawings and Paintings are senseless, and more than half dead…there is nothing in the whole of art which runs more against reason, than to place things without Houding… We need, then, to show what Houding is, and the remarkable feat which is necessary to achieve it. Houding, to express both the artistic sense of the word and the power of its nature, is that which makes everything in a Drawing or Painting advance and recede, and makes everything from the nearest point to the most central, and from there to the most distant, stand in its own position, without seeming nearer or further, lighter or darker, well apart from the objects which are next or around it, so that it remains in its own position, in respect of size and colour, light and shadow; yes, being able to trace the interval of a place, or distance which is open and empty between each object, receding or advancing naturally to the eye, as if it were accessible with one's feet, and finding everything planted in its own place; this is what one calls Houding…"

I revisited the idea of illusion in traditional painting with a new perspective. I found my thinking about pictorial space changed as a result of the time I spent working digitally, and especially as a result of time spent making 3d models for "Chorus of the Blind" and other projects. I began a series of paintings which would become a fusion of

"Red Ghost"
Oil on canvas
24 x 22 inches
2022

the concept of Houding with a representation of space informed by computer graphics.

Around this time, I'd written a text called "Keeping and Breeding Paintings in

Captivity". It imagines paintings as mystical creatures which are difficult or impossible to

see and cryptic in nature and the objects we call paintings as their habitats or terrariums. I

thought of this text when I set out on this series of works. I had been thinking about the

concept of Houding and after working almost exclusively in digital media for an

extended length of time, I wanted to make traditional paintings as a way to work freely

with new ideas and feel as unencumbered as possible by technical difficulties. These works depict subjects like ghosts and floating empty cloaks, odd atmospheres, and fumes. The compositions employ elements imaginatively inspired from animations and computer games as a context in which to build a suitable world for these unnatural creatures.

In these works, a number of my interests merge. The environments these paintings depict are elementally charged and mysterious, and informed by the space found in computer games. They display a tension which derives from the adherence to traditional technique and medium which has been subjected to the color and space found in progressive digital experience. In "Red Ghost", the central figure is a drifting crimson fume traveling over a ground covered with billowing green smoke.

As an ongoing series, I feel I have a lot of room to develop these pictures. I am curious how far elements of color contrast and saturation can be pushed in terms of houding when the subjects represent the computer's simulation of unnatural or extra natural space and its convincing sense of depth.

Alongside this series of paintings, I was developing an animation that is a combination of elements and ideas assembled from other projects which I could not resolve. I had been thinking about using the image of the Sleeping Muse by Brancusi as a moving element in a video game program. I'd made a digital painting of a shady, forested environment with a hidden spring and pool which I first imagined as being a location in "Chorus of the Blind". I began to see this image as a cyber Hippocrene, the revered home of the Muses in antiquity, the hole Pegasus opened into the heart of the Earth by stomping

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his hoof. When I placed the Sleeping Muse there, she seemed to belong. The feeling of space in the background has not been calculated by the computer but colored as a flat image according to the principles of houding. The Muse herself is a computer rendered 3-d model. Realtime lighting is calculated by the computer and captured with a simulated camera. Pictorial media and ideas old and new converge in the service of this moving image. What is the drive people have through history to convince themselves the pictures

Still from "Sleepwalking Muse"
Animation
2022

they make might be real? We live in a natural world overflowing with endless visual information and wonder, but it has not proven itself capable of satisfying our desire to see. Is there something we desperately want to see but is invisible? The Sleeping Muse never opens her eyes. We listen at the bubbling spring for her to whisper something to us. She never opens her eyes. Is she asleep or dead? Why doesn't she look at us? Is she blind? Is she dreaming, is she in a coma? We make image after image after image. She never opens her eyes. We never see what she sees. She doesn't want to see our world, but we never stop trying to get inside her head. We never stop trying to see her world because we want to live there also. We believe it is better than the one we can see.

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