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No Oil Painting: Digital Originals and Slow Prints

Jo Briggs

School of Design
Northumbria University
jo.briggs@northumbria.ac.uk

Mark Blythe

School of Design
Northumbria University
mark.blythe@northumbria.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Slow technology is... in part a reaction against the impulses toward instantaneity afforded by digital technology.

This paper explores the slow work of a contemporary ‘analogue’ painter in the context of current research enquiry into digital art, authenticity and value. [2] A group of artists were recruited to take part in in depth interviews conducted in their studios. The paper describes the artist’s resolutely non digital practice and outlines a concept design for a ‘slow print’ based on his work.

Author Keywords

Slow technology, digital art, reproduction, participatory design, painting.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.



Figure 1. Detail of Moorish tiles depicted in a realist painting style by Ewan Cartright.

INTRODUCTION: THE ARTIST

Ewan Cartright is a fine art painter in the British hyper realist school. He is one of the few painters who earns his living solely through the sale of his work. He sells his paintings in an international market brokered by a major London gallery. As part of a series of case studies he took part in an in depth biographical interview in which he described his working processes in some detail and reflected on his career.

For the last decade the artist’s practice has involved an increasingly time-consuming manual process. Creative production stems from visual source material gathered during research visits to international city locations using photography and drawing. Back in his studio, the painter’s

pre-production involves creating and wall-mounting small compositional sketches, looking, and contemplating: *‘there’ll be certain ones that stand out and others...most of them will be discarded...but this is where [the paintings] all kind of begin.’* At this point, the process of committing the carefully chosen image to canvas commences a process sometimes lasting more than three months, employing a repertoire of practical craft skills cultivated over decades in production of the painting.

CONTEXT: ART, CULTURE AND THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

In the field of digital art, many practitioners have experimented with current and emerging digital devices and processes for artistic production and display. For example, British artist David Hockney has received much attention for drawings he has made both on the iPhone and iPad.

Encountering digital tools and processes presents new and aspiring artists with opportunities and challenges that must be carefully negotiated from aesthetic and pragmatic perspectives. For example, the Giclée reproduction process combines the convenience, ease and speed of the digital printer with, arguably, some of the sensory qualities of traditional fine art printmaking. Its use of pigment-based inks, which are less likely to fade and discolour than inkjet dyes, enables images to be copied retaining a level of conservational permanence at modest cost. Facilitating printing of unlimited ‘editions’ of artworks for the market, the Giclée process is part of a digitally-enabled culture and economy that facilitates instantaneous duplication and widespread sharing of artefacts without degradation. This raises questions concerning authenticity, originality, ownership and value addressed in the wider context of a research project around the notion of ‘Digital Originals.’

DIGITAL ORIGINALS RESEARCH

Ewan Cartright has focused his considerable effort on producing unique canvases with much professional success. The vast majority of paintings he produces are sold and command prices of £35,000 or more. While not inherently against the idea of generating multiples or editions, he argues that prints must *‘stand on their own terms as pieces of work.’* He is particularly critical of processes producing *‘poorer versions’* of an analogue original.

During the interview Cartright described at length the different stages involved in making his hyper-real paintings. Each one starts with lines drawn on the canvas with a pencil and rule. General outlines of shapes and buildings are

sketched in then mapped out with vanishing points and perspective lines. The drawing stage lasts for two to three weeks. When the drawing is complete he begins to paint in thin oils. The first marks might indicate a swathe of light cutting through the picture. Gradually the painting is built up over a period of three to four months. Reflecting on this process Cartright noted that lots of interesting effects were lost as the next stage of the painting began. The drawing for instance is first obliterated by the paint. Successive layers of pigment continually remake the work until a final image is produced. The nature of the medium is such that many images, some very beautiful, are destroyed as the final piece is created. Reflecting on this the artist and researcher discussed the notion of a digital reproduction of the work that would capture and display in slow time these successive stages.

SLOW PRINTS USING STOP-MOTION

A tripod-mounted digital camera positioned in the painter's studio would record the image on canvas as it develops. The technique of stop-motion animation could iteratively capture individual shots at regular intervals generating a sequence of reproductions. These might then be played back day by day to reveal the painting's evolution over time. Such recorded media expose what hitherto have been obscured within the additive painting process. The concept will be developed with the artist and designers in an iterative process.

Boulter and Grusin among many others, make a convincing account of how digital cultural processes and forms are *remediations* of, and inherit properties from, established analogue practices. [1] As successive painting apps have appeared a new genre of YouTube video has also developed. These utilise a form of stop-motion to show speeded up portrait painting or constitute playbacks of apps like Brushes, which records individual marks as they are made (e.g. 'Finger Painting on the Apple iPad from the live model David Kassan'). [3] Clearly the stop-motion recording of Ewan's work could be played back or forward at any speed and it might be interesting to make an entirely controllable version. But as Gaver and colleagues have argued in relation to designs such as the drift table, it may be more interesting to constrain interaction. [4] A 'slow print' might only change in real time so that its playback—of what is actually a sequence of images—would take as long as the painting did to make.

Viewers of Cartright's work sometimes assume that it was created digitally. Because it is hyper real they suppose that photography and Photoshop must have been heavily involved in the production of the paintings. Part of the appeal of the suggested prototype for the artist is that it

would expose the actual process as well as being visually interesting in its own right.

CONCLUSION

Currently this 'slow print' notion is purely illustrative. Future iterations with the artist may radically change the concept. However it exemplifies a shift towards slowness also marked in other research designs such as the drift table, which can in part be considered as a reaction against the affordances of digital technology towards speed and maximal efficiency. This in turn relates to wider critiques of social drives to produce and consume more at increased rates and in ever-greater quantities (e.g. Honoré). [5] Such critiques are also reflected through projects such as Hillis' 'Clock of the Long Now,' a clock conceived with a year and a century hand. [6] Painting itself can be thought of as a slow art and in a sense a measure of the long now. The 32,000-year-old cave paintings at Lascaux for instance, convey very powerfully a sense of what Hillis calls 'deep time.' It is perhaps appropriate then to explore the notion of slow prints in relation to the practices of painting.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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