

# Muybridge, Motion and the Still Image

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James Faure Walker *Forms in Motion: Fugue* 19" x 32" giclee iris print

## **Abstract**

*The exhibition 'Silent Motion' juxtaposed photo sequences taken in the 1880s by Muybridge, the pioneer of early cinema, with works by contemporary digital artists. These works ranged from web surveys to murals, demonstrating the enhanced methods now widely available for studying motion, and for presenting the complex ebb and flow of city life. This paper reflects on the enduring fascination of the still image – whether the format be painting, photography, or digital media.*

I am one of those digital artists who take their camera with them to city centres looking for some sort of pattern in the random journeys of pedestrians. This paper explores parallels between Muybridge's experimental photography of the 1880's and some visual structures developed by artists who study the movement

of pedestrians, traffic, or populations. Muybridge's freeze-frame photography can now be instantly created with a digital camera. A few seconds of any scene of people walking in the street, with traffic passing by, can be transformed into 24 still shots. Muybridge's photographs were not intended to be works of art in their own right, but scientific studies. However, they contain fascinating details – shoes, sunglasses, an unexpected pigeon. Digital artists have been fascinated by the early years of cinema because of parallels with the rapid growth of digital tools. We can gather and process huge amounts of data with little effort. The creative part is working out how to shape this into something with a real point.

I curated the exhibition 'Silent Motion' for the Kingston University's Stanley Picker Gallery, subsequently at the Colville Place Gallery, London, last year [1]. The major Muybridge

archives are in Kingston (where he was born, spent much of his life, and died in 1904), and contain some surprises – several photo-sequences have the look of conceptual art of the 1970's. The idea of exhibiting these images alongside digital works – from web sites to a 'printed' installation - was to set up a dialogue between past and present: how can 'raw data' function in an art piece? What are the ethical and the aesthetic issues? What is the role of the still image in describing motion? The exhibition led to a searching debate at a conference, with contributions from exhibitors: Rejane Spitz (Brazil), Annette Weintraub (USA), Hans Dehlinger (Germany), Lane Hall and Lisa Moline (USA), Andrew Carnie (UK), Victor Acevedo (USA), Anne Baker (UK).

Bearing in mind ISEA Nagoya's theme of 'Orai', my paper will present images of the movement of pedestrians and traffic in a busy city. This is a subject I have puzzled over for the past seven years in my own work, and one reason I was drawn to Muybridge in the first place. Muybridge lectured to audiences of artists – mostly academic and conservative artists - and showed them what the naked eye could never see – the bird frozen in flight. Muybridge revealed a new world, the split second snapshot, that eventually became incorporated into the painter's language (from Duchamp to Bacon); today's digital cameras enable the painter to wander around a city absorbing data at a rate undreamed of by previous generations.

Should this visual material be condensed into a 'still' image? How far can the habits and methods of the painter be usefully transposed into a digital format? Some speakers at earlier ISEA symposia spoke with buoyant confidence, picturing a new media that would soon take over from the traditional physical and non-interactive arts. The pioneering days of cinema had their false dawns too, with entertainment eventually hijacking what had begun as scientific experiment. Today it could be that traditional art forms will re-emerge having absorbed the new technology and the expanded horizons. What we can be sure of is that the technology won't make that creative leap all by itself [2].

1. [www.kingston.ac.uk/picker/silentmotion](http://www.kingston.ac.uk/picker/silentmotion). The catalogue is available from DELUXE-ARTS Gallery and Creative Space, 2-4 Hoxton Square, London N1 6NU, UK, tel: 44 20 7729 8503, [www.deluxe-arts.org.uk](http://www.deluxe-arts.org.uk) email: keith@deluxe-arts.org.uk

2. I am currently writing a book on painting and the digital studio, as part of my AHRB Fellowship. Digital and physical paintings plus attached essay can be found at the Digital Art Museum site at <http://www.mkvv.com/DAM/faure-walker/index.htm> or [www.dam.org](http://www.dam.org).