ILLUSIONS OF REALITY

By Lanny Webb

A little over three weeks ago I attended the SIGGRAPH conference in Los Angeles. For almost a week I wandered through the exhibition floor viewing sometimes extraordinary new technology with a feeling of awe. I remembered my last SIGGRAPH of five years ago, and I was overwhelmed with the incredible changes that had taken place in that short time. My excitement, however, came with a heavy dose of apprehension as I was also constantly confronted with the reality of how little I know. I was reminded of walking the midway of my county fair as a child. Gaping at the colorful and exotic entrances to "Egyptian Ella, lady of a thousand veils" or " The Alligator Man, raised by alligators from birth" I can still hear my mother say, " Don't look in there; you don't want to see that." But now that I have the dubious title of "adult," I am free to go in every booth. I retired every evening that week with the feeling that my hard drive was full and with the haunting suspicion that my mother was probably right.

Recently, at the University of Georgia, we conducted a national search for a Full time position in "Computer Art." In a connected faculty meeting, a senior painting professor asked if I could define this new area. I cannot or perhaps will not, for if we define computer art, it becomes limited by its definition, and the potential of this new tool is virtually limitless. For some traditionalist, however, "Computer Art " is an oxymoron. For others the computer is one of the most exciting creative tools to ever come along. For me, the computer's power can be both a seductress that leads me into kinky aberrations of my normal artistic direction, or a forthright facilitator in achieving images not otherwise possible.

I originally took on this new medium not because I was seduced, but because for our graphic design students to find work, they had to know it. In my initial three year pilgrimage into the new language of computer acronyms, my imagemaking, for all public purposes, ceased. I was working, learning, struggling, fighting the computer. I did volumes of weird creations. Some were really quite interesting, but, they all, however, lacked (?). Some were clever, some just bizarre. None of them, however, had much meaning beyond their flashy technology, and there lies the rub. This stuff is tedious, sometimes painful, to learn. But it can do extraordinary, unbelievable things. It is, therefore, easy to become so fascinated with your new found wizardry that the "magic" starts telling the wizard what to do.

Much, if not most, of the digital imaging being done today yields results which are obviously created with the use of these remarkable computer tools. Odd distortions and montages with transparent overlappings or combinations of the computer's

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version of traditional pen, pencil, and brush tools with photographic sources appear to be the most predominant result. Maybe this is as it should be, exploring and investigating a new medium, pushing to see in what new directions of creative expression it can take us.

For me, however, It was not until I quit trying to show off my new tricks that I started making images I began to have some respect for.

It is when the medium overshadows the idea that it makes me uncomfortable with what I see in much of the new computer generated images. Experience, however, does not bring with it immunity, and even the most reserved of us can be wowed. I am tremendously excited by much of the computer generated art being produced today, but I wonder if I like it because I am drawn to the magic of its message or the "Jeez, how'd they do that?"

I attended an opening recently of a collection of engravings by the remarkable John Taylor Arms. I am attracted to his work because of his sensitivity to subtle lighting relationships and unusual lighting situations. I revere his work with a sense of awe for his incredible, almost inhuman, craft and detail. Arms felt "art" had two elements: the spiritual and the technical skill. He believed the spiritual content was by far the most important. He also felt, however, that the mastery of one's medium and perfection of technique was what allowed the spiritual idea to achieve greatness.

While far from a master of my medium, I too strive to create work that has as its essence a spiritual quality. So I will preface my discussion of my computer trickery with my artistic direction.

In general my images seek to re-create more of the spirit of a place or occurrence than the actual place or occurrence itself. They are documentary in their attempt to record a posture rapidly vanishing from the Southern American experience. They are editorial in that they are a reality greatly tempered by sentiment.

While my Southern childhood of the fifties leaves no illusions of this turbulent period of transition, I am never-the-less indebted to a heritage generous with colorful customs and genteel tradition. For me, things Southern are based, in large part, on a devout respect and reverence for the land, a love of life, and a confirmed necessity for time to reflect. These quiet times for reflection and genteel relationships are perhaps by themselves inconsequential, but they create in unison what I feel is at the heart of Southern conscience. My images are born of these things, not so much from a sense of nostalgia, as from an attempt to record this disappearing sentiment once native to the South.

Within this setting, my subjects are almost universally outdoor images, some urban, mostly rural. Man, or some indication of his existence, frequently appears to be a necessary, while not prominent, component. In some instances he is obvious, in others subtle, but in the best of situations, he is upstaged by his surroundings. This demotion of man to a subordinate status is the result of a personal prejudice. I often perceive an essence in things around me that is so apparent it becomes a tangible entity in itself. An old house, familiar place, or summer breeze can have a distinct presence. I relate to this presence at least passively if not actively. A favorite old chair becomes a friend, and the rich scent of an oak fire consoling. I am easily humbled by the power of a summer storm but at the same time feel an odd reassurance in its omnipotent show of force. There is a timeless quality about these things. We find solace in sunsets and ocean views perhaps because they are always different but always there. They are the constant; we are the transient element. It is this relationship between temporal and continual that I find intriguing.

The most important factor in determining the success of my work, however, would be in its ability to re-create the essence or mood of a particular setting. To this end, I have found the use of light to be my most valuable tool. I have always had a fascination, if not an obsession, with light and how it affects the spirit of a subject. Our perception of a subject is determined by its lighting, and yet we frequently are not aware of this ever present but subtle force. The essence of any subject can change poetically, dramatically, or mystically depending on the quality of light. Strong sunlight can have an oppressive, suffocatingly still heat or be viewed as a wash of bright purifying light. The rapidly changing light of a late afternoon summer storm often creates a simultaneous contrast of colors and moods, for example, splendor and gloom. The mystery of a silver moon can cast a quiet peace or create a crisp tension. A special magic can be felt during a dawn or dusk full of transient light. During these times there is a mixture of calm and constant slow change like the movement of the hand on a clock. You can't see it move, but every minute is new. The use of unique lighting then becomes the primary tool I use to create the specific mood, or the character, of a subject or place.

This character of a particular setting, however, is often times very subtle. For this feeling, or unique quality, to be apparent, I must focus on its "essence" by deleting or adding information. In most instances, it is what I take away, more than what I add, that improves the image. The images, then, are not just attempts to faithfully record reality in the form of a photograph. They try to portray, in a photographic medium, an image which in reality never existed, but, through numerous manipulations, more clearly conveys the mood or character that attracted my attention to the subject initially.

There is an inherent quality of truth, or reality, a photograph has that a drawing or painting, regardless how tightly rendered it is, never has. People will accept almost anything as reality if it is a photograph, because they believe that "photographs don't lie." My approach, therefore, is for the computer to be mostly transparent or invisible. I try to create illusions that stay just inside the edge of this photographic truth, images difficult or impossible for film to record, or creations of what would result from a photographically utopian world where everything is where you want it and the lighting is always just right. My images were never real, but hopefully still contain enough of a photographic essence that the viewer will readily accept them as believable.