

Twenty Years of ISEA: a Painter's Response

James Faure Walker (gb)

University of the Arts, London
Reader
James@faurewalker.demon.co.uk

In the earlier days of ISEA there were those who looked ahead and saw an epoch where art goes 'digital' wholesale; it would become disembodied from its physical shell, like the medieval soul breaking free from the corrupted flesh. 'Traditional' art forms were scheduled to mutate at the millennium. Exhibitions were announced as 'the art of the future'. Images and installations were unashamedly sci-fi-erie robotics staged in dark rooms.

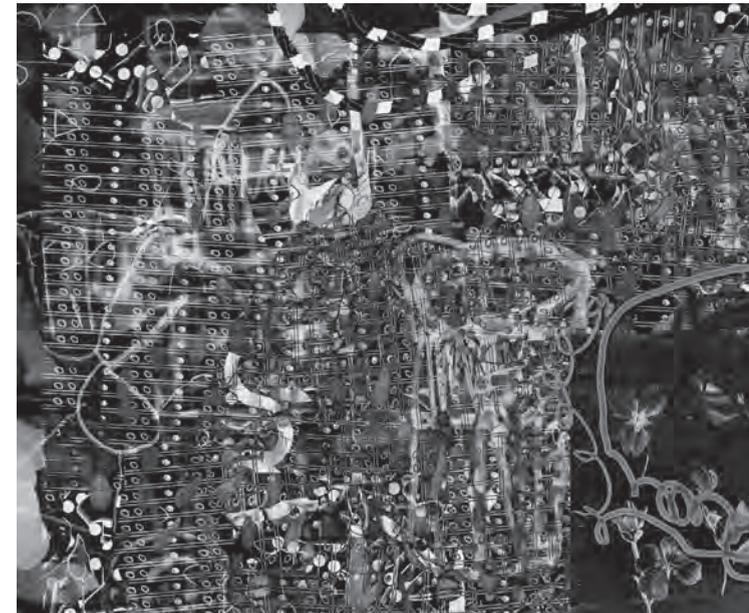


Fig. 1: James Faure Walker 'Dark Filament' 108.5 x 124.6 archival Epson print African World Cup

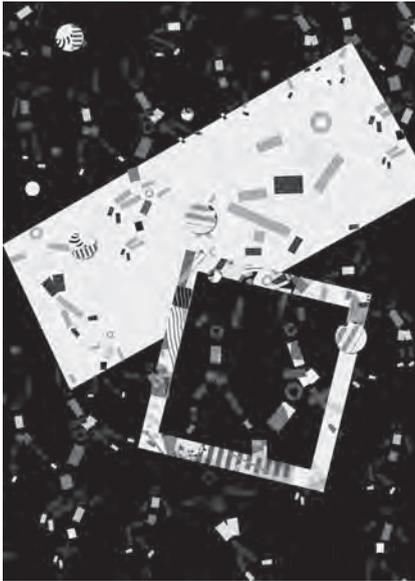


Fig. 2: James Faure Walker 'Up' 2009 84 x 60 cms archival inkjet print Photo: 2010 FineArt – International Fine Art commission for South African World Cup

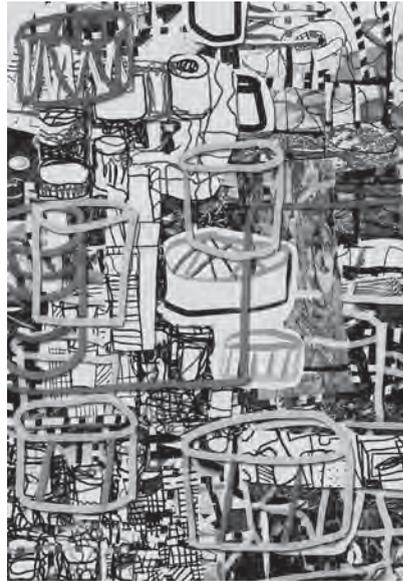


Fig. 3: James Faure Walker 'Colour and Drawing: Garden Table' 1998 81 x 56 cms giclee iris print

Twenty years later, ten years after that millennium that now seems insignificant in comparison with 9/11, we look back on those predictions as symptoms of the time, when words like 'hyper', 'cyber', 'wired' had a neon aura. That future has been whisked away. Now we talk of global warming, financial meltdown, and militant fundamentalism. Nor has the technology advanced as we expected: we have iPhones and Facebook, not VR glasses. Traditional art has retained its physical shell. Digital photography and websites are taken for granted as nothing special.

The past futurology of ISEA is a subject in itself, perhaps even a subject for a gently satirical painting. Digital paintings, drawings, prints – termed 2D art, or still image work – were themselves well within the orbit of early ISEA. But gradually they were seen as marginal, old-fashioned, unexciting, and in effect excluded. ISEA as a whole has always been ambivalent, even paranoid, about the perceived 'art world'. So what does a spy from that world of studios, galleries, and art magazines make of ISEA's progress? In my own case I have participated in ten ISEAs since 1990, and exhibited eight times with SIGGRAPH, yet remain resolutely a painter. I still don't know where I belong, but press on with making the works I want to make, and am as fascinated as ever by integrating the power of computer graphics with the resonances of painting.

The topics discussed at the last Belfast ISEA had moved far from the preoccupations of the early ISEA meetings. Then 'computer art' was an isolated minority interest, somewhat at odds with the world at large. ISEA connected

composers, animators as well as visual artists from all over the world. At the first ISEA I took part in, twenty years ago, the topics were 2D art, animation, electronic music, and artificial intelligence. The novel formats emerging were the CD Rom and multimedia; then came interactive, virtual reality, and of course the web. At the 2009 ISEA in Belfast the keynote speeches covered social or activist projects, design, and fashion. Papers featured collaborative projects, helping communities bond through cell phones. There were hardly any 2D works on show, and the most attended sessions were on education. A first time visitor might have been puzzled that this was a conference on electronic art. ISEA was now primarily for the academic theorist or the community arts team.

References

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