

## DIGITAL PAINT TO DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY: THE LONG REACH OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

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Passionate experiments in the interaction of color gave rise to the Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1960s, in which spatial ambiguity ruled above all else. As an early digital artist coming from Painting, this language of abstraction is so pervasive in my thinking that nothing can purge it from my visual vocabulary, even when I move into uncharted territories of meaning derived from mixing real world photographic and “painted” imagery.



*Rocks and Trees in the Glen: State IV.*

The tension between abstraction and representation has haunted much of the discourse of art over the last century. Passionate experiments in the interaction of color gave rise to the Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1960s, in which spatial ambiguity ruled above all else. Rooted in the explorations of the Bauhaus artists, the concept that an artist can create meaning out of engagement with the formal compositional elements of art, with or without representational content was and remains appealing.

As an artist who embraced digital imaging precisely because it promoted a new visual vocabulary, this is a memoir of my enchantment with the computer as the medium for creating meaning through explorations of composition. Writing code never appealed to me, but the early computer software/hardware configurations developed for artists pulled me in right away. I wanted repetition, I wanted distortion, I wanted parts of my imagery to serve as commentary to other parts of my image.

### Beginnings in Abstract Painting

There is no avoiding that the Abstract Expressionists informed the early careers of many of us in the digital media field, leading us to create imagery that obscured any representational content. Although many cite the mess of oil paint and the traces of the artist's brush strokes as the core of Expressionism, for myself, it was the compositional tensions of color, texture, and gesture that enchanted and propelled me forward in my artistic investigations. Abstract Expressionism promised irresistible magic, and I did not resist. We believed that this was a purer art form, that the communications were more significant and subtly complex than simple representation. The readable qualities of the imagery served as a distraction from this magic.

I began my career as an abstract or nearly abstract painter, working with layering of gesture and forms with the goal of teasing out a dynamic image on the still canvas. In the digital art world of today, where moving image is so pervasive, we think of paintings as frozen, but for those of us immersed in abstraction these were moving images, visually unfolding over time, despite their physical attributes.

Although it seemed absurd to hide the sources of the natural sources for the shapes of color and textures in my painting, these forms had little meaning in themselves. Flowers became dancing forms, seedpods became glyph-like elements completely removed from their source. Showing the sources would have slowed down the reading of the canvas.

### Early Digital Art

I began painting into the computer in 1984, at a time when in my physical painting I was already cutting stencils for forms, so that I could easily repeat them. Additionally, I was exploring innovative compositions by visually dividing my canvases with masks, and then playing with the resulting unexpected juxtapositions.

As early digital artists, using the first dedicated software/hardware systems, we input imagery by drawing directly on digitizing tablets, as scanning was barely readable, and prohibitively expensive. Using existing configurations in the days before "off the shelf software," we could essentially only modify the color of these drawings, repeat them, change scale, and repeat again. These early limitations made the transition from painting all the more natural and alluring for those of us who were more fascinated by formal explorations of the compositional tensions of visual art than with its story telling potential.

Oddly, in those early days, it was no longer necessary to hide the source of our digital drawings. The novelty of the medium, and the lack of expectation that "the computer" could produce anything realist, was enough to free viewers to experience the abstract, lyrical qualities of the imagery even when the evidence of the sources showed through, as in my early series based on forms from flowers. In reviewing a 1987 exhibition that included both my paintings and computer works, Bill Zimmer wrote for the New York Times that the paintings were "pleasant but ordinary" while the computer images presented a breakthrough, even though they represented similar compositional investigations. In painting, representation, especially of flowers, was regressive. In digital work, everything was, in 1987, progressive. [2]

### Readable Imagery and Abstract Thinking: My Personal Big Bang

This assessment of digital work as exciting despite the obvious inclusion of readable imagery no doubt fed into what became my own "Big Bang." In 1988 I was working with the motifs of medieval Hebrew manuscripts in my then exclusively digital work. I turned to these sources for compositional inspiration as I searched for ways to break out of the traditions of typical European painting. One day I realized that the decorative motifs of these manuscripts echoed the decorative and architectural motifs of the places where they were created. This discovery set me off to make works about "place", about specific sites, digitally interweaving photographic elements that gave the impression of "place" without direct representation.

As I wrote in 2007: My first series on the Marseilles Bible. . . . was a celebration of the decorative motifs with little readable reference beyond flowers and other natural forms. The motifs set the context for the imagery, encircling it, pushing against it, holding it back. The images from this time are clearly two seemingly opposite references brought together: historical structures and flowing, colorful forms. [3]

Once liberated to create work about place, the pieces slowly evolved to interweave pictorial references, changing as the technology developed. Shunning direct digital photography, I "painted" with image fragments, layering them together in a dialogue of compositional tension that continued to spring from the tradition of Abstract Expressionism.

One can hardly refer to these works as representational, and yet they do present and describe. Often referring to sites of cultural heritage, these images bring historical realities to the viewer in a mediated form, providing a portal to an imagined past or other places outside of personal experience..

### Conclusion: Unexpected Return to Drawing

Over the last few years, I have been collaborating with my younger self, interweaving scans of my pen and ink drawings from over 40 years ago with recent digital photographs of the same locations. The mixing of gestures of a young artist with the newer medium of digital photography gives fresh meaning to the space between levels of representation and interpretation.

Suddenly, after years of resisting the "natural media" that imitate paint, I found myself in the right situation to seriously experiment with digital paint. I was recently an invited artist in residence in Arles-sur-Tech in the French Pyrenees, and the natural beauty of the location and the emotionally moving remnants of the medieval city stirred me to simply draw. These drawings in turn were mixed with photographs.

Why is this the Big Bang of Electronic Art? Because while the world is looking at the technology behind the image, the real innovation is in the imagery itself. It is the ability to move from painterly gestures to photographic and back.

The boundaries are gone, and only the visual is left. The medium no longer matters. The image has won out.

### **References and Notes:**

1. Hans Hoffmann, "Search for Real in the Visual Arts," in *Search for the Real*, eds. Sara T. Weeks and Bartlett H. Hayes (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1967).
2. Bill Zimmer, "Winners' Works in Hartford," *The New York Times*, February 22, 1987.
3. C. B. Rubin, "Notes from the Decorative Zone: Embellishment and Meaning in Jewish Art," *Proceedings of Conney Conference on Jewish Art, Madison, Wisconsin*, (2007).