

## PAINTING FURTHER ALONG THE RIVER

**James Faure Walker**

The impact of 'digital painting' on regular painting is a complicated story. Until the nineties 'computer art' was predominantly abstract and about systems. My painting has always been lyrical. It has moved between electronic and 'physical' forms without much pain. Increasingly these distinctions matter less and less.



*no caption*

In the 1970's there was a lull in the dispute between abstract and figurative painting. In fact exhibitions of what we would now term 'conceptual' art claimed to go 'beyond' painting. So painters of all kinds bunched together and forgot their differences, intent on showing that they were still going strong. There were ideological arguments against painting too, condemning it for just being 'colour art' or 'playing with paint'. The strands of painting that developed through the decade - from free form abstract painting, pattern painting, new image painting, neo-expressionism – tended to be more liberal and baroque than the uptight doctrines of minimal and conceptual art.

This was the period I came of age as a painter. I was also editing the magazine, Artscribe, which came to be the UK's leading (and artist-run) journal of contemporary art. By the eighties, once 'post-modernism' became the obligatory catchall for curators, whether I put a fish, triangle or blob of orange in a painting did not matter that much. It was a free-for-all, it was all 'imagery', it was all equally meaningful or equally meaningless. Yet in my own mind I was not a believer in the relativism of post-modernism. I suppose it was a lingering belief in 'modernism', the idea of art re-inventing itself and moving forward.

Before considering the impact of digital painting it is worth mentioning this pluralist context that persisted throughout the eighties. Put simply, there was little appetite for 'the next big thing' – nobody was putting on exhibitions called 'the new art'. The computer art of the seventies had largely been connected with constructivism. It was mathematical and disciplined, and in my opinion not massively significant as art. It did not look revolutionary.

I came to computer graphics rather late, in the mid eighties, but was overwhelmed (and this was unexpected, in that I associated computer art with a rather sterile and systematic approach) by the freedom it offered in the way of colour, and the speed of composition. I had experimented with an early Canon digital camera in 1990, but did not own one (an Apple QuickTake) till 1994. So I had seven years of playing around with paint programs – the first being Dazzle Draw on the Apple II, then Deluxe Paint on the Amiga – before I could integrate photos into the process. My main problem was coping with the freedom of digital painting, and then returning to the practicalities of regular painting. I still work in both forms, in parallel, though increasingly I think of it all as 'just' painting. The difficulties have never been technical. There are methods for going from 'screen' to canvas, including stencils, printing, projecting, or just remembering. Equally, I often photo 'paint' and work it back into a digitally produced piece, and enjoy the way viewers cannot tell the difference. The difficulties, rather, are the difficulties of painting.

There has also been a general misapprehension. Using digital gadgetry does not of itself make you a revolutionary artist, nor – if you work as a painter – does it take you beyond the borders of the discipline. A blue is blue, whatever the medium. Nor does 'digital' painting have to be logical, geometric, weird, cyber this or cyber that. My own approach has always been somewhat gestural, even expressionist. The wobbly territory between so-called abstract and representational painting stays much the same. Yes, we have the freedom to scan anything and throw it into the mix – and I do this as irresponsibly as anyone else – but sometimes you just get Photoshop soup. The 'regular' painting world is now more alert to the digital world than it was - how could it not be? - but I have yet to see purely 'digital painting' that would blow those old methods away. I prefer to think of myself as enrolled in the big city of painting.

In my presentation I shall show how my preoccupations have remained more or less constant, even when the 'medium' switches between the physical and the electronic. To talk about colour, light, movement, the flow of a line, doesn't seem to be saying anything very much - neither original nor significant. But I hope it is enough just to get a painting to come to life. As to the presence or absence of 'images', to this question of representation and abstraction, I am not too troubled. If it works, I have no problem in introducing a horse, or a trumpet-player. My approach is quite superficial in that respect. On the other hand, I have attempted to make paintings from encounters with wild-life, from the Great Barrier Reef in Australia thirty years ago, to a stag that stared me out in Suffolk, England, this year. I have called the talk 'further along the river' as an allusion to the book I wrote 'Painting the Digital River: How an Artist Learned to Love the Computer' (Prentice Hall, 2006).