

Chapter 8

Digitally Mediated Art Inspired by Technology Integration: A Personal Journey

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ABSTRACT

Artistic practice is a uniquely personal thing. As such artistic activities and the products produced thereby often develop and unfold in highly idiosyncratic ways. In reading a comprehensive artistic biography one often becomes familiar with the who, what, where when, how and why of a creative individual's formative influences, education and the development of their art. Following that model, in this Chapter I am attempting to elucidate the progression of my artistic practice from pre- to post-digital activities. After more than 25 years of blending computer-drive practice with traditional media studio practice my artwork is truly digitally mediated and heavily influenced by the many possibilities offered by technology integration. Perhaps through showing this unique range of influences, activities and experiences it will be possible to more clearly illustrate how influences as diverse as a degree program in traditional painting, multiple projects in scientific illustration, and years spent in the practice and practical application of computer science have inspired me to move along a path from pencils to pixels and archeological sites to digital displays in museums internationally. It is my hope that this "personal history" can inspire others to see less obvious possibilities and move ahead into realms that might be difficult to predict at any point along potential the arc of one's artistic career.

BACKGROUND

My artistic practice is driven by current investigations and previously published historical research in the sciences, and also by my research into the history of science and technology. Numerous collaborations involving scientific illustration and visualization projects over the years have served as the impetus for my more personal aesthetic and expressive works. My artistic output has, over a period of many years, shifted from art in the service of science to very personal and expressive "fine art" inspired and underpinned by science and the integration of various digital technologies.

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Displaying my art in public venues always provokes questions from viewers. Some common examples are these: How has science driven my work in the fine arts? How does one explain the connection between the visual arts and science (an all its aspects)? How has the evolution of digital media changed the possibilities of scientific visualization? What are the digital software tools that are most useful in my artistic practice? How long does it take to produce a finished work of art? Which digital hardware technologies are my favorites in the studio? Do I still think like a painter/traditional artistic when using digital tools?

For me the connectivity between the seemingly disparate disciplines of science/technology and the arts has occurred incrementally, sometimes in flashes, more often quite slowly, in starts and lurches and certainly it has happened across my entire lifetime. For example, my father was a Navy pilot, and I cannot recall a time that I was not around airplanes, engines and ideas about of using state-of-the-art technology to make exciting things happen. My father also built electronic devices from “kits” and I do recall watching him solder wires and connect glowing boxes of electronics together. All that seems quite magical to me as a boy.

Organizing one’s life influences into something that is coherent to others is an interesting exercise. After being asked to propose a chapter for this book I have spent many hours reflecting on how my expressive artwork became so influenced by science practice and the possibilities offered by technology. Technology has played a huge part in my life. I have been a professional artist, across a variety of media, for more than 40 years. Now, in 2017, as a practicing digital media “fine” artist, graphic designer, scientific illustrator, photographer and new media project collaborator my sense of what can be done to develop effective and stimulating visualizations spans a wide range of possibilities. From the cover of publications for IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers), to NSF (National Science Foundation) supported grant applications and archeology projects, to illustrations of historical events and objects for United States National Park Service, to eBooks for universities in India, to new media theatre productions for commercial clients in the USA, to art exhibitions in museums in China and Taiwan, my understanding of tools and media is, in each moment, always changing and mutating and expanding in often very surprising ways. Those who are, or have been, involved in similar projects will understand exactly what I mean.

My initial artistic training was extremely traditional and very technical. I was taught to use physical tools to make physical things through the application of carefully practiced techniques. The standards for the production of objects/products was very high, and tolerance for failure was very low. As such I was trained to be a “studio” artist, one who was (for the most part) trained by much older and deeply experienced artists who used the media of their mentors: paint, ink, clay, plaster, paper, etc. My studio training at the Dayton Art Institute, the Ohio Institute of Photography, and the Fine Arts Department of the University of Dayton was of seminal importance in my future artistic development. Why? These institutions all prided themselves on an awareness of the contemporary art scene, on developing innovative art practices, and on making available newly introduced technologies and media. Even so, the senior faculty in all three locations were mainly traditionalists, mostly European, and had come to the USA for reasons most often associated with conditions surrounding WWII. These men and women were truly traditional artists in the sense that their practice focused on passing along the artistic traditions, and traditional studio practices, they learned from the “masters” who trained them. Moreover, these were talented individuals whose mentors were literally among the first practitioners of “modern” art. What I learned from them has stayed with me always.

But, as with any human activity, innovations are made and long-held traditions change. Clearly, history shows us that sometimes technologies are disruptive and impact industry and art practice with dramatic

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