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Mapping Art's Escape from the Traps of Technology

by **Jon Ippolito**, Guggenheim Museum

The 2005 SIGGRAPH jury was more than a chance to survey the digital art scene with a roomful of passionate but collegial comrades. It was also an opportunity to reflect on the role, for better or worse, that technology is playing in the production and exhibition of digital artwork. More than any of my fellow jurors, I think I was particularly conscious of the stereotype that many artists, critics, and curators attach to exhibitions of art with a technological focus. According to this perception, the SIGGRAPH Art Gallery is less art exhibition than display showroom, where technicians show off the latest Maya or Illustrator special effect rather than pushing the boundaries of art.

As if to corroborate this prejudice, the jury saw literally hundreds of works that appeared to be inspired by some filter or toolbar icon from the latest release of a commercial graphics package. This preference for technology and technique over concept and creativity has led to a vast digital opus whose superficial dazzle is matched only by its aesthetic and political backwardness.

Yet the conservativism we see in juried art exhibitions may be attributed not just to the technology of production but also to the technology of presentation. In juried shows of any size, the quantity of submissions is difficult to handle except via a standardized review process that puts undue emphasis on individual images projected out of context on the wall. Focusing attention on such isolated "slides" enforces biases against any work created by an artist whose interest lies outside the now-weary exertions of the 20th century's picture plane. The process demands that artists who work outside the frame be twice as inventive as their peers; they must be creative with both the documentation and the work itself. For works that spilled outside the frame, the jury did its best to dig beyond the initial image; however, most of those artists hadn't supplied enough documentation to convey the work's intention and scope.

If the jury review process casts unconventional formats in the least favorable light, it can cast a misleadingly generous light on conventional formats. By erasing features like scale or texture, the projected or screen-based image, like the book illustration, encourages reviewers to presume these features are what is most appropriate for the imagery: thick impasto for a brushy composition, grandiose scale for a bold abstraction. (I know a graduate school that accepted an MFA applicant only to discover that each of the "vast" landscapes they saw in her slides turned out to be more postcard than panorama.)

In the case of the digital prints so prevalent in SIGGRAPH shows, the scale and texture seen in the projected image turn out to be especially illusory, since screen-based imagery has no inherent scale or texture, despite the fact that these aspects are critical to most art in the Euro-American tradition. The height of Velasquez' Las Meninas positions its viewer in the position of the reflected king and queen; the breadth of a Jackson Pollock immerses its viewer in its myriad skeins of dripped paint. Monet's Nympheas are painted with just the right-sized brush to create a hypnotic flip-flop between abstraction and representation. Yet when digital images become prints on a wall rather than pixels on a screen, their monotonously uniform glossy surfaces and preset sizes reflect the dictates of available printing technologies rather than marks or meaning conferred by their maker. The results can be disappointing, like an exhibition of Monet posters in place of paintings.

Bearing in mind the deceptive effect technology can have on production, selection, and exhibition of art, I tried to influence the jury to counter this technological "bait and switch." I had little patience for digital images that emulate atmospheric watercolors or brushy oil paintings, less because those are "outdated" styles than because using digital media to ape plastic media is the aesthetic equivalent of cubic zirconia. I often saw more integrity in digital photography and its manipulation, because photography is inherently devoid of surface (since Fox Talbot, anyway) and hence lends itself to screen-native manufacture and printing.

Medium aside, the exhibition's theme of mapping information in time and space didn't justify including technical exercises or polite abstractions. New media tend to enact rather than represent, so I argued for works that map events in the real world rather than simply connecting colored dots on an immaterial canvas: GPS data teleported from the street to the gallery wall; image colorization outsourced from China to the US; a private conversation spilling from a mobile phone into public space, made visible on a billboard; cash exchanged from the art world to Wal-Mart and back again. Today's global economy wouldn't exist without information transacted via digital media. I am delighted that some works in this SIGGRAPH Art Gallery break the stereotype by reflecting on the influence those processes increasingly have on all forms of digital production.