

October 2019

Artistic Journeys

Insights from Digital Artists Around the World



FEATURING
**JOHN
DERRY**

October 2019

ARTIST JOURNEY



John Derry

In my work, I attempt to relate multiple visual ideas and concepts and leave it to the viewer to make their own connections.

FACT FILE

Born NE USA

Country Living USA

Age 68

Digitally Painting 35 Years

Programs Used Corel Painter

Computer Specs

Macbook Pro, 2.5Ghz, 16GB RAM
Wacom MobileStudio Pro

Website

www.pixlart.com

My Work is
Expressive
Multifaceted
Engaging!

In undergraduate school, I worked in the university art department. One of my jobs involved a lot of preparing camera-ready art. As a result, I learned how to convert photographs into half-tones for print, which I found to be technologically interesting. Similarly, in taking hand lithography classes, I was as interested in the process of applying imagery to a litho stone as much as I was by the quality of the resulting printed image. It is this interest in the technological aspects of various imaging mediums that led me to computer imagery.

After finishing grad school, the earliest hand-created computer images began appearing in trade magazines. The first image I remember seeing that ultimately led me to a career in digital painting tools was an image by Alyce Kaprow, then doing post-graduate work at MIT's Visible Language Lab. This image manipulated photographic imagery I had not seen since mastering Rauschenberg's analog transfer drawings...only this was being done

on the computer!

It was then that I sensed this was a crucially important moment in the advancement of mark-making tools (using the hand to create expressive imagery on a computer). Up until then, the computer was focused on words and numbers. It was now moving into imagery. Whatever it took, I was going to find a way into this nascent technology. Thus I began my journey.

The first PC-based color-capable program was Time Arts Lumena, then a 256-color program that used an advanced graphics card. It also supported a stylus-based tablet with no pressure at this time. This at least enabled hand-mediated gestural input. I first encountered Lumena at a computer graphics trade show in Anaheim, California in early 1984. I stood and repeatedly watched the sales representative demo Lumena. He always began his demo by saying, "I'm not an artist, but I imagine if I was...". Bingo! I instantly realized, "This company needs an artist!" I





← “The intermixing of photographs with painting and drawing has a very strong appeal to me.”

ended up working at Time Arts a year later.

Although Lumena was an advanced application for its time, I caught onto it fairly quickly. I was soon part of the team designing the software. When I was introduced to the notion of painting using a computer, the so-called brushes were expressionless. At this time a “brush” was a series of closely spaced circles; if you brushed too fast, the distance between the applied circles increased, leaving a series of unconnected dots. A drawn “pen” line would not separate into individual elements but quickly drawn curved lines would exhibit a faceted quality as the computer couldn’t keep up with the artist’s drawing speed.

I was able to utilize my background in expressive analog gestural tools and apply it to a new generation of digital variations. I was constantly moving back and forth between toolmaker and tool user. I would design new brush features in collaboration

with the programmers (my toolmaker hat), then utilize the feature in artwork (my tool user hat). I could then apply what I’d learned as a user when I put on my maker hat, and the cycle would then repeat.

I believe if you are truly passionate about something and it brings you joy, never give up. I am fortunate to have found myself in the midst of a cultural and technological revolution that I have been able to play a small part in. More than anything, my goal has been and continues to be creating hand-drawn gestural tools for the purpose of personal expression.

We all have emotions, feelings, thoughts...there is nothing more exhilarating than communicating a personal expression to others. Expressive mark-making tools exist to enable translating something in our mind’s eye into a format that others can experience.

Sharing our inner experience enriches the world for all.

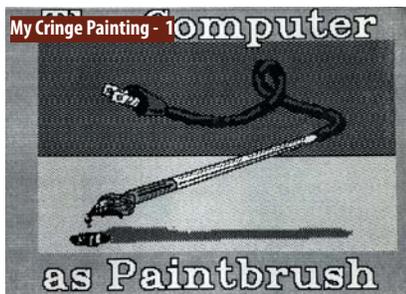
Who are your favorite artists?

Robert Rauschenberg – I was introduced to Rauschenberg’s work in the mid-60s. He used a variety of techniques, which enabled photographs and brushwork to intermingle seamlessly. I learned how it was done in traditional media. When I started working in the software industry, getting photographs into a graphics application was a new capability, which it possible to continue developing my Rauschenberg inspired style.

John Singer Sargent – Sargent can say so much with so few brush strokes. At a distance, his paintings look photorealistic. As you get closer, it turns into abstract expressive brushwork.

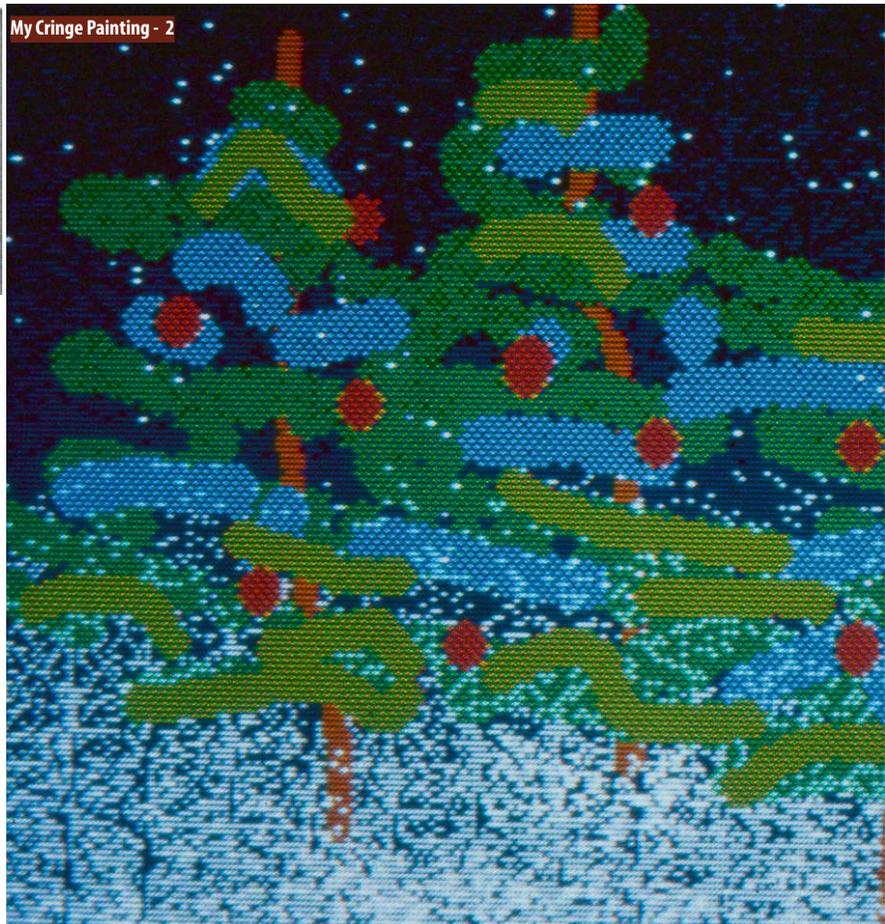
Johannes Vermeer – Mastery of portraying light in his paintings is unmatched. Research has shown that Vermeer employed a camera obscura to project an image of his subject/composition onto his canvas—he was





Cringe one was done in 1984. I did this for the local newspaper, which was doing an article on my teaching on the emerging digital wave that was about to overtake us. To create this, I used PC Paintbrush on an IBM PC using DOS 1.2.

Cringe two was also done in 1984. I gained access to a Mindset computer. Unlike other IBM PC compatibles of the time, it had custom graphics hardware supporting 16 simultaneous colors, and hardware accelerated drawing capabilities.



When the earliest hand-created computer images began appearing in trade magazines, I sensed that this was an important moment. Up until then, the computer was focused on words and numbers. It was now moving into imagery.

a technologist of his time! Vermeer was influenced by the portrayal of light as imaged via this technique, and it appears in the paintings as an ultra-realistic touch.

What current artistic challenge are you trying to overcome in your life?

Every art project presents challenges. The longer you've been creating art, the bigger your "bag of tricks" becomes. The first time you encounter a new technical or artistic problem, you might get stuck, but you

work through it. You find a solution. This information is added to your bag of tricks. As time passes, and you keep having challenges, your bag gets bigger, and you spend less time on problems you encounter.

Coupled with this, is the ever present artistic challenge of being able to make a living at art!

Creating art is itself easily a full-time job. You also need to have a business sense, which is another full-time job. So, the challenge is how to combine both into one full-time job. Not easy.

What are some frustrations with being a digital artist, and how have you overcome them?

When I completely switched from traditional to digital image-making, it took some time not to overdo things. With a background in traditional image-making, I developed a sense of how long it took to reach "the end" of a piece (based on analog features, like waiting for paint to dry).

In contrast, getting to the same level of finish happens more quickly in a digital image-making environment.





Kamakura is using Rauschenberg's transfer technique.
This image is based around a visit to Kamakura, Japan.

As a result, I was using my analog sense of task time in a digital environment and regularly finding that I had gone several decisions farther to completion, which resulted in an overdone image.

Over time, I was able to recalibrate my sense of how long it takes to reach “the end” of a piece.

Another issue has been educating the public about digitally created art. People ask similar questions. In my years, the common questions are, “Does the computer make art?”

“Isn't it easier—and therefore cheating—to use a computer to make your art?” “Do fine art digital prints have acceptable quality?”

I have taught, written, and spoke about these issues over the years. It is no longer the big deal it once was, but these questions still come up.

Where do you find your reference material to paint your artwork?

I take a lot of photographs and consequentially have quite a large library of imagery. If I don't have the desired image, I will

generally find and photograph it.

What is your typical workflow, and how long does it take you to complete a digital painting?

My process begins with an initial image, usually one of my photographs. The image must contain the seed of meaning, emotion, or idea I want to convey. This seed image will usually suggest other related or complementary elements.

From there, I begin to add additional imagery, graphic references, gestural brushwork, words, and so on. These elements are on individual layers, which allows me to constantly adjust and tweak the composition until it feels “right.”

I will often leave a composition to sit for a day and then return to it. I find this break allows me to look at the image with a fresh set of eyes, which often leads to further refinements.

I would say the average time I spend on an image is a week.

What piece of advice would you give someone starting out in digital art?

The computer is simply a medium with the ability to enable visualizing differences. Try something, if you don't like it, undo it. This is a powerful feature traditional media doesn't have. In the digital environment, you are free to try out variations and then select the best one.

Digital tools don't automatically mean better results. In order to succeed, you need to still focus on the basics of art, some of which are drawing and composition skills.

What has helped you grow the most in your art skills?

I'm left-handed in a right-hand world, which has forced me throughout my life to look at the world from a different perspective. It may sound like a small thing, but this constant viewpoint has provided me with a mechanism by which I'm constantly evaluating the world in terms of alternative solutions.

I believe this awareness of the alternative has been an important component in my development as an artist.



What was your biggest “ah ha” moment where something clicked, and you started to flourish with your digital art?

Layer Masks. The digital layering environment was a big moment related to creating complex compositions. Before layers, everything was done on a flat canvas with only one floating element at a time.

In 1994, Painter was the first desktop app to implement multiple uncommitted elements in a single file. Photoshop followed a year later. Photoshop’s implementation was more

robust and included layer masks, which was a way to non-destructively remove or add to the layer’s content. Once I absorbed layer masks’ functionality, it opened up a whole new level of compositional layering.

What is your favorite tool that you use?

This answer changes over time, but right now, my favorite tool is my Emergence brushes. These brushes excel as texturing tools. I designed them so that Emergence strokes lay down a randomized pattern that doesn’t repeat from

This image was done after my first trip to Japan,
and it celebrates the rich imagery of Tokyo.



Art Through the Eyes of the Artist

02

Equinox was an evocation of my feelings after learning my wife had leukemia.



I have learned over time that emotional high points or low points, in this case, can be the impetus for creating a personally expressive statement.

When Pam's diagnosis came back as leukemia, the observing artist in me went into action. I realized I had to express something of this moment. In my mind, the rivulets of rain running down the window were indicative of tears that hid the outside world from my thinking.

I believe the outward artistic expression of a traumatic moment, such as I experienced can provide the artist a cathartic release that is beneficial.

Whether or not a viewer experiences that same emotion is open-ended. If the artist's emotion comes through, a viewer may experience something totally different, but experiences something none-the-less. In the bigger picture, I'd prefer a viewer dislikes a piece rather than ignoring it.

When confronted with a diagnosis such as leukemia, all sense of control is lost. Fortunately, the story has a happy ending. Pam is now eleven years post-transplant with no lasting long-term effects.

Sharing our inner experience
enriches the world for all.

“Stay true to your own artistic vision. It is all too easy to get caught up in trends that don’t stand the test of time.”

stroke to stroke. This gives the stroke an organic quality.

How do you feed your creativity, so you don’t feel burned out?

Everyone gets burned out at times. In these cases, it is often important to push through the resistance and keep going. Over my career, I’ve learned to be what I refer to as being “creative on command.” In these situations, you learn to rely on experience to find solutions.

I also believe in getting out of my studio regularly! A change of environment and mindset allows the thought process to change gears. I walk up to 100 miles a month during good weather. Even if I’m not actively thinking about a current project, it is working away in the unconscious. I can’t even count the number of times I’ve hit upon solutions to creative problems while out walking.

Do you feel you have artistic support in your life, and how has it helped you?

I’ve been fortunate to have always been supported in my art career through family and friends. Back in the day, art school was a foundational learning and social experience that provided a community of like-minded individuals with which to interact.

Post-education, I always sought out artist groups to commiserate with. With the rise of the connected internet, it has become possible to find a variety of online creative communities to interact with other artists.

What would your future self, tell your younger self, if you could zip back in time?

I would tell my younger self that a major revolution in

art-making tools is on the horizon, but the fundamentals will still be the same. Good visualizing skills will still be crucial.

Do you have an art degree? Do you think an art degree gives a person an edge when it comes to creating?

I went to the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and I received a BFA in painting and drawing. I furthered my education by earning an MFA in painting from Cranbrook Academy. My degrees have probably helped open doors that may have otherwise been inaccessible. They have certainly provided an ability to talk about the formal aspects of art, as well as develop the discipline to work through technical problems.

If you plan on teaching at the college level, an advanced degree is vital. If, on the other hand, you are producing art for sale, experience, and discipline will serve you.

What resources do you recommend for growth?

I highly recommend The Artist’s Handbook of Materials and Techniques by Ralph Mayer. I have consulted this book many times over the years while developing new brushes. This book contains a wealth of information on just about any traditional media.

I also recommend The Digital Art Academy for growth. They are a hard resource to beat. Beyond offering a good variety of changing coursework, the membership provides a supportive environment in which one can develop many artistic skills.

Talking about art is just as important as making it. You need to develop the ability to talk about your work and what drives you to create, and you can find that in their community group too.

