

THESIS

TECHNO-HUMANITY PAINTINGS:
ART AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Submitted by

Charles Luna

Department of Art

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Master's Committee:

Advisor: Patrice Sullivan

Nathalie Kees

Mary-Ann Kokoska

Christine Martell

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ABSTRACT

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My thesis paintings utilize narrative to convey social commentary related to humanity in the Information Age. During the early part of the new millennium, I have found the social assimilation of digital media tools and systems, along with the collective beliefs and behaviors associated with them, to be both fascinating and disconcerting. Through my art I endeavor to express the paradoxical relationship between the established social benefits of information technology (IT) and its questionable effects on humanity.

The work allegorically mingles the socially normalized with the absurd suggesting implicit dissonance underlying explicit harmony. The atypical integration of personal imagery with both historical and contemporary iconography is designed to evoke divergent contextual associations of the subject matter. Through these conceptual mechanisms the work encourages reflection regarding the cultural influence of IT in society.

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RESEARCH ON THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

My thesis work is motivated by the manner in which excessive interaction with IT has reshaped humanity. From the turn of the twenty-first century digital media have taken on an increased role in the lives of human beings and in the function of civilization. The average person in the U.S. would find it difficult to remember a recent day in which they did not in some fashion interact with some form of IT. Current research contends that in contemporary American society, the activity that people spend more time on average than any other is interaction with information-related technologies.¹

With over a decade to investigate the influences of digital media technologies, research is now providing disturbing evidence regarding the adverse impacts that they pose to human beings. Findings suggest that IT devices and systems lend themselves to overuse which is linked to unfavorable physiological and psychological effects. Reportedly the brains of people who have heightened interactions with IT develop similar physical characteristics to the brains of drug addicts and alcoholics. In addition, excessive use of IT is being linked to negative psychological effects including mood disorders and depression.²

The increase in distance communication through social media platforms influences a search for virtual social validation. Masses of people currently use social media as a way to establish social clout, by contriving and presenting appealing versions of virtual identity.³ Regarding the drawbacks of such behavior, research suggests that social media use promotes feelings of envy toward the presented lives of others and discontentment with their own real lives.⁴

Another social impact of IT is its capacity to influence the manner in which people give their attention. Due to their accessible design, personal and mobile digital media devices provide

opportunities for people to attempt multitasking activities. However, current research on the subject contends that the human mind lacks the capacity to focus full attention on multiple items simultaneously. Distracted mental states associated with IT correlate with increases in the identification of low attention spans in young people and the diagnosis of ADHD.⁵

IT-related distractedness becomes considerably more harmful with the increase in texting while driving causing vehicular accidents. Current statistical research from the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report suggests that in spite of increasingly stricter laws banning its practice, vehicular hazards related to texting while driving are continuing to increase in the United States.⁶ Such evidence implies that IT interaction is sufficiently compelling to promote illegal behavior and divert attention from the basic human priorities of health and safety.

Beyond its associated health impacts, the increasingly constant infiltration of everyday life with countless forms of digital stimuli has raised the notion of a so-called "New Aesthetic" in contemporary culture. This opinion suggests that aesthetic experience in digitally networked societies includes a blending of the virtual and physical worlds. An exemplary case of this notion is identified by writer Evgeny Morozov in a 2013 New York Times article in which he describes a digital visual enhancement device that allows the projection of digitized imagery into people's field of vision of the real world. This technological innovation was motivated by the interest in making actual environments more interesting to look at.⁷

The amplified IT permeation of modern humanity has influenced even the time-honored standard bearers of aesthetics themselves. In the art world, IT has not only contributed to new genres of work found in art museums, it has changed the very nature of art display. Digital technology has modified how museums consider exhibition. There has been a trend away from traditional object only oriented exhibitions to more digitally mediated exhibit experiences. This

change has been motivated by the need to connect to a contemporary audience that is increasingly involved in daily IT interactivity.⁸

Furthermore, the sharing of digital images captured by mobile telecommunication devices has increased to such an extent that it also is influencing art exhibition practices. According to a 2013 article in Art News magazine, this behavior has become so common that established art museums are beginning to modify their policies toward the allowance of photography within their venues. Many reputable art museums are now allowing audiences to photograph exhibited artworks for personal use. By doing this museums avoid the need to supervise pervasive cell phone photography. Additionally they are banking on the promotional potential of social media image sharing.⁹

Perhaps the most pronounced manner in which IT has impacted the modern world is through the faith that people have placed in it. The dominant paradigm of the modern technological society includes an unwavering belief in the beneficial potential of IT to serve as the main conduit of innovation and problem resolution. In his book *To Save Everything, Click Here*, author Evgeny Morozov labels this contemporary ideology "internet-centrism" and cautions against its effect on society.¹⁰

Morozov contends that internet-centrist beliefs promote the ideology of "solutionsim" resulting in compounded negative social impacts. Solutionist beliefs establish the value of addressing easily identifiable problems through easily accessible means.¹¹ The combination of these ideologies can lead to the inaccurate assumption that all problems can be quickly and easily solved through technological approaches. In addition, investing vast amounts of energy and resources in addressing easily identifiable and solvable problems can distract focus and energy

from the investigation of more complex societal concerns and more involved problem-solving methods.

The true threat of such ideologies is the degree to which they become normalized in modern society. Morozov contends that the more societal norms are determined by IT the more difficult it will become to scrutinize and change them.¹² In such a society, the social issues meriting central focus will be those that can be identified and addressed technologically.

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE AND ARTISTIC PURPOSE

As I entered my mid-twenties in the last decade of the twentieth century, the seeds that would later blossom into the digital phenomenon known as the Information Revolution were beginning to germinate. I began my transition into adulthood as my society began its transition into the Information Age. Like most of my fellow citizens, I was unaware of the societal changes that would take place as a result of advances made in the area of IT during the early part of the twenty-first century.

My first conscious notice of heightened human interaction with digital media technology was observing my high-school-level art students. They began to assign passionate importance to their personal media devices, giving them nearly constant attention. It was apparent school-wide, that student use of cell phones and personal gaming gadgets distracted student focus from curricular class activities.

In response to this situation, the school administration developed policies intended to reduce the use of such technologies in the classroom. The continuous need to enforce these policies revealed to me the captivating nature of IT devices in general. Students needed to be reminded daily of rules regarding their use. Confiscation often led to further discipline issues and was ineffective in curbing the desire to interact with these technologies. Over time I became more aware that the compelling nature of digital media interaction reached far beyond my local social sphere, seeming to permeate the mass behavior patterns of society. Strangely, in the midst of their initial vilification as distractive nuisances in my place of employment, ITs were being embraced by my society as commercially, socially, and personally beneficial. It soon followed that such technologies gained formalized institutional value. Ironically, in my work as an educator, I was exposed to the establishment of technological literacy as an important

educational skill, the inclusion of online coursework as substitutes for traditional classroom coursework, and the implementation of digital media technology as a measure of sound teaching practices.

To be certain, ITs do have practical and beneficial social applications. My views are not those of the technologically illiterate or the anti-technological. In my life I effectively employ the tools of digital media both personally and professionally. However, it is in my observations of the negative tendencies of IT use where I perceive absurdity and tragic potential.

ITs lend themselves to compulsive and obsessive use. Excessive use promotes distracted states of attention and distorted estimations of the social value of mediated interaction. The digital media interface promotes the use of simulates for engaging, managing, and defining the world, which can diminish the importance assigned to more direct interactive experience. These adverse impacts are reinforced through digital media consumerism, which facilitates the mass consumption of conformity through the commodification of individualism.

As an artist I am inspired to bring attention to what I see as a perilous overreliance on such technologies to define cultural and personal identity. To this end, I endeavor through my art to express the paradoxical relationship between the established social benefits of ITs, and their undesirable effects on humanity. My work optimistically promotes reflection regarding the social character of the Information Age.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Narrative as Social Commentary

The conceptual focus of my thesis work is to stimulate reflection regarding modern society's interface with IT. The primary approach employed to promote this purpose is the use of visual narrative as social commentary. The devices of modified relational symbolism, the symbolic use of color, and the variation of audience perspective have been incorporated in the work to reinforce the messages of individual narratives.

The use of a narrative format is intended to engage the viewer's imagination and stimulate meta-cognition. Through the process of reading the relationships of the subject matter, unconventional personal and social associations can be formulated. IT and other culturally familiar imagery portrayed in the work orient attention to plausible meanings. While relational ambiguity between constituent elements allows for varied interpretation regarding the social implications of the work.

Symbolism to Impart Narrative Meaning

Visual metaphor has been employed to infuse narrative connotations. To this end, the work includes a combination of personal, universal, cultural, and time specific symbolism to convey meaning. The work allegorically mingles the socially normalized with the absurd suggesting implicit dissonance underlying explicit harmony. Modified relational symbolism refers to the atypical integration of personal imagery with both historical and contemporary iconography. This device is designed to evoke divergent contextual associations of the subject matter.

Screen symbolism is one of the central content delivery devices utilized in the work. Imbedding symbolic imagery in digital screen depictions is a metaphor for the socially common

manner in which humans process visual content in the contemporary IT society. The main way that people interface with IT is through the screens of digital media devices. As seen in the examples of *Neogenesis* (Fig. 1) and *Common Ground* (Fig. 2), this approach is employed consistently in the thesis paintings as a narrative element.

As another primary communicative device, the work contains imagery that is personally and universally recognizable due to its connection with common human experience. Depictions of human figures and human relationships are consistent components throughout the work. For example, imagery that references the intimacy of family is portrayed in a number of the paintings. Some of these depictions, are of my own family members. For instance, the child in the painting *Neogenesis* (Fig. 1) is my son. Such representations are designed to impart the significance of human connections and direct interactive relationships. Cognitively and emotively, this imagery offers a common human reference point from which to construct meaningful associations.

To a large extent the work employs Western cultural symbolism as a conceptual tool. The use of historical and contemporary symbols together encourages cross cultural referential associations for deciphering meaning. In a large portion of the work faith in digital technologies is portrayed comparably to religious faith. Several of the paintings incorporate Christian religious symbolism to support concept. A number of these symbols derive directly from religious artworks from art history as seen in the painting *Neogenesis* (Fig. 1). In other works, such as the painting *Common Ground* (Fig. 2), the integration of secular art historical iconography with modern IT imagery indirectly implies religious connotations. In some works, such as the painting *Salvation* (Fig. 3), the use of religious symbols lacks direct art historical reference but still connects the technological with the mystical. The combination of scientific

and spiritual themes provides an uncommon perspective from which to consider the manner in which IT influences world view.

Human Technology Hybrids

A common metaphorical device employed in the thesis work to create a state of conceptual discord is the visual hybridization of humans with information technology components. Such bizarre juxtapositions abstractly reference the social normalizing of the absurd which is a central message of the work. A specific example of these human/technology hybrids can be seen in the painting *Communion* (Fig. 4). In this painting the heads of several human figures have been substituted with cell phones of exaggerated scale. The depiction of human bodies with IT heads comments on the psychological nature of the human/technology interface. This approach references the manner in which digital media devices have increasingly become an integral component of human cognitive function. This suggests that in contemporary society the human mind itself has become a platform for IT.

Symbolic Use of Color

In the thesis paintings, color has been extensively used to reinforce narrative content. The most common symbolic use of color in the work is the depiction of cellular devices in gold to denote their precious and valuable social associations. The painting *Validation* (Fig. 5) exemplifies this brand of figurative gilding.

Beyond the use of gold, the thesis work incorporates other symbolic uses of color to imply conceptual significance. For instance, the painting *Communion* (Fig. 4.) is divided horizontally through color symbolism to communicate content. The use of bright and saturated colors in the top half of the format references a connection to the natural world. In the bottom half non saturated colors are used to symbolize a connection to the simulated world of IT. The

painting *i of the Beholder* (Fig. 6), is another example of metaphorical color application. In this work the red lipstick represents the practice of sexual objectification through IT platforms.

Variation of Audience Perspective

Another content device utilized in the work is the compositional variation of audience perspective. Altering viewpoint is intended to modify the conceptual understanding of the work. To this end, some of the work orients the "audience as participant", while other work acquaints the "audience as observer".

In the "audience as participant" approach, subject matter is depicted from the perspective of someone actually interacting with the imagery presented in the paintings. This approach is used in a series of works, each depicting hands holding cell phones from the viewpoint of the cell phone user. As illustrated in the painting *Connection* (Fig. 7), this device places the viewer as a subjective component within the narrative itself. What they interpret to be happening in the work is also happening to them.

In the "audience as observer" approach, subject matter is depicted as separate from the space of viewer. Through this application, audience enters the narrative as a spectator rather than a contributor. The painting *Technotopia* (Fig. 8) effectively demonstrates the orientation of viewer as bystander. This perspective allows for more indirect reading of the content. The viewer initially interprets what is happening in the work, which can then lead to more personal associations.

COMPOSITIONAL DEVICES

A variety of formal devices have been implemented in my thesis work to align compositional integrity with conceptual meaning. The mechanisms most consistently applied in the work for this purpose include spatial depth, balance, harmony, variety and emphasis. The consistent combination of these devices is intended to instill visual and conceptual cohesion within individual works and among the body of works.

The formal device of spatial depth has been employed primarily to construct believable narrative settings in each work. Several different spatial characteristics are evident in the work including exterior and interior space, linear and atmospheric perspective, as well as scale that imitates the visual phenomenon of diminishing sizes. These compositional features offer illusionistic visual spaces for audience to enter the work.

The compositional devices of balance and unity have been employed to provide a visual harmony that contains the conceptual dissonance of seemingly unrelated visual imagery. Primarily, visual equilibrium in the work has been addressed using informal balance and pyramidal structure. The work is unified mainly through the visual uniformity of its stylistic representation. This includes the consistent application of paint media and depiction of subject matter, as well as the constancy of light sources, color palettes, and value ranges.

These devices support overall compositional cohesiveness, giving a sense that the imagery depicted belongs together. The unified visual depiction of bizarre imagery references the social normalization of the absurd, suggesting an implicit dissonance underlying the explicit harmony of the IT society. This speaks to the casual assimilation of IT culture which overlooks underlying its negative social impact.

Color has been employed formally in the paintings to enrich meaning through harmony and visual interest. The distribution of similar colors in compositional formats has been used as a balancing and unifying device throughout the work. Color harmony reinforces the sense that the subject matter depicted is conceptually connected. Additionally, differences in color value, temperature, intensity, and amount imbue the works with visual variety. Color harmony and variety serve to lead the viewer to through the content by visually activating particular narrative elements.

The painting *Wellspring* (Fig. 9) demonstrates an integration of structural devices that align composition with content. This work incorporates illusionistic spatial properties to provide believable narrative environment. In addition visual harmony and conceptual dissonance are integrated through pyramidal structural balance, and the unified stylistic depiction of seemingly unrelated visual elements. Color has been used symbolically to promote conceptual cohesion, and distributed formally to support visual equilibrium.

In my thesis work the use of formal elements has been addressed primarily to support readability of the narrative content. To be sure, an integral characteristic of successful visual storytelling is attracting viewer attention to important components of the narrative. To this end compositional devices have been implemented to emphasize the importance of particular narrative elements within the paintings. Throughout the thesis work conceptual focal points have been created primarily through placement, contrast, and hierarchy.

Centralized placement, isolated placement, and the placement of visual paths have all been used to bring attention to significant conceptual components in the work. Contrasts in color value, intensity, and temperature have also been used as effective visual attractants. In addition, focal points and visual hierarchies have been produced using proportional variation.

The painting *Neogenesis* (Fig. 1) exemplifies the integrated mechanisms of placement, contrast, and hierarchy to support the reading of the narrative. In this painting the arms of the hybridized male figure and the child are visual paths that lead the eye to the centrally placed focal point. This focal point conceptually symbolizes the reactivation of divine consciousness through a connection to pure humanity. The enlarged proportion of the non-hybridized child emphasizes the sacred importance of a connection to pure humanity. Additionally, the significance of the crayon as a tool of divine creative activity is accentuated by its exaggerated scale and through its relatively intense dark-green color.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES AND REFERENCES

Examination of my current art's orientation to artistic influences and conceptually related art forms serves to foster an expanded comprehension of the thesis work. The types of art that I consider to be most influential in my work are narrative art and art of social commentary. Explaining their impact on my work is helpful in further clarifying my artistic purpose. Additionally, an understanding of my work can be enriched by analyzing its relation to other technology related art forms.

Narrative Art

For as long as I can remember, I have been moved by art that tells a story. Art's ability to indicate the passage of time and imply the interaction of entities within a common setting or circumstance has always been captivating for me. I have both experienced in myself and observed in others the Aristotelian catharsis provided by narrative art. From this perspective I see the influential power of narrative art forms primarily in their capacity to reveal the world in a manner similar to the way that our lives are revealed to us. Each human lives his or her own personal narrative, and narrative art allows us to connect our subjective self to an objective reality that includes the subjectivity of others. Considering my affinity for narrative art, it is not surprising that I have incorporated its use into my own work. Nor is it startling that many of the art forms that I find influential are effective storytelling vehicles.

My initial appreciation of visual narrative began in my childhood through my exposure to the art of illustration. In my youth I spent hours making art motivated by the master illustrators of children's books, comic books, and fantasy adventure art. As an adolescent the work of fantasy illustrators inspired me to produce similar thematic work from my own imagination.

The work of fantasy illustration still influences my art today. The style in which I depict my subject matter, specifically the human figure in my thesis work, finds its origin in my investigation of fantasy adventure styles. My current style incorporates components of realism in the depiction of form and proportion, while its color use is less naturalistic than more realistic approaches. My work also exhibits the influence of science-fiction illustration in its depictions of human-technology hybrids.

In addition to illustration, my thesis work has been influenced to a large degree by classical art from the Western tradition. I have been greatly inspired by works finding their foundation in Greco/Roman classicism. Conceptually, I am drawn to what Nietzsche referred to as the Apollonian character of classical art. Rather than being purely mimetic, this form of visual art employs beautiful and balanced idealism to symbolically represent the forces of nature and humanity. Classical work promotes cognitive reflection regarding the intangible aspects of existence. Its effectiveness in this capacity is due in large part to its inherent narrative functionality. One of the primary purposes of classical art is to relay a story.

The works of the High Renaissance in Italy have been highly influential in my work. Art from this time period applied the artistic mechanisms of ideal balance, beauty, and grace to communicate both spiritual and intellectual content. Particularly the works of Michelangelo serve as exemplary compositional and conceptual references for me as an artist. His work epitomized the use of elegantly composed visual narrative to reconcile the seemingly incompatible doctrines of religion and science during his time.

Surrealism is another art genre that has impacted me as an artist. Specifically the art of Rene Magritte has been most influential in my artistic expression. Primarily it is the unorthodox manner in which his art delivers narrative content that I have found to be useful in my own work.

Such uncommon depictions of commonly recognizable imagery invite viewer curiosity. The presentation of apparently unrelated visual elements in a fashion that suggests belonging encourages the audience to clarify narrative relationships.

Art as Social Commentary

For me the ability of narrative art to disclose insight and to communicate a social message enriches its compelling character. Such experiences engender reconsideration of personal morality. It is with this capacity in mind that I have implemented narrative art as a means of social commentary in my own work.

I have been inspired by the use of art as social commentary since I was a young adult. My first recollection of this type of art is political cartoons in the newspaper that employed visual satire as a form of social critique. In my undergraduate art degree program I became aware of the social commentary art in the art historical record as well. Since that time I have been moved by the potential for art to be a tool of cultural scrutiny and to raise social awareness.

Although my first excursion into art history began over two decades ago, specific artworks remain engrained in my memory even now. I remember being greatly affected by Pablo Picasso's painting *Guernica* and its power to focus world attention on the atrocities and dangers of fascism. I was also moved significantly by the mural work of Mexican social realist painters such as Diego Rivera. These artists revealed to me the potential of art to catalog the historical and cultural struggle inherent in the human condition. Exposure to this artistic approach has influenced the exploration of social commentary in my thesis work.

Contemporary Social Commentary Art

My thesis work has been most directly influenced by contemporary artists whose work focuses on social commentary in general, rather than art that speaks exclusively to the social

impact of IT. Specifically, I have found the artwork of the street artists Banksy, Shepard Fairey, and Ron English to be aesthetically inspirational. Although their art differs in style and approach, the constant in their work that I find most artistically impactful is their use of narrative art to bring attention to modern social issues.

The work of these artists presents common recognizable cultural imagery in a fashion that reveals socially critical messages. For instance, Banksy's stenciled mural artworks commonly depict the paradoxical nature of status quo cultural ideologies. Similarly, Fairey's graphic propaganda posters often portray the inauspicious character of contemporary collective norms.

English, who began as a street artist in the 1980s, illegally making his own anti consumerism art on advertising billboards in New York, has continued to use narrative as social commentary in the new millennium. Most notably, his anti-McDonald's paintings were featured in Morgan Spurlock's 2004 film documentary *Supersize Me*. English's "Popoganda" art employs popular media icons and advertising approaches to raise public awareness to the absurdity of contemporary social paradigms.¹³ He suggests that such artwork is a form of "culture jamming" that attempts to interrupt the casual consumption of culture with thought provoking imagery.¹⁴

Historical Technology Related Art

Since my thesis work's conceptual focus is the social influence of IT, its associations with other technology-related art forms can promote further elucidation of the work. The following section contextually orients my art through comparisons with correlative historical and contemporary artwork. The art forms used for comparison are referential rather than influential. However, their analysis provides useful viewpoints from which to understand particular characteristics of my thesis work.

The societal changes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced by the technological innovations of the industrial revolution impacted artistic expression. Some of the artwork of this time period was reactionary regarding the advent of cultural industrialization. Comparisons of my thesis work with the artistic movements of Neoclassicism, Romanticism, and Realism reveal interesting conceptual correlations.

Neoclassicism responded to the social technical transformation of the Industrial Revolution by referencing classical artistic ideals. Neoclassical artworks emphasized balance, elegance, and splendor. Paintings of this genre depicted important people of the period in idealized fashion. Rather than promoting the positive attributes of the industrial revolution, this art was influenced by enlightened doctrines that scrutinized social structures of the time.¹⁵

In comparison to Neoclassical Art, my thesis work also employs classical formal devices. In addition, my paintings also incorporate idealistic depictions of subject matter. Similarly to Neoclassical Art, my work does not embrace the positive attributes of the technical revolution of my time. Moreover, my work aligns with enlightened ideals, such as the reasonable scrutiny of social behavior in the interest of social health.

Romanticism reacted against the unequal distribution of wealth and liberty engendered by the Industrial Revolution. This movement promoted the access of freedom to all individuals and the importance of human passion. Romantic artworks included depictions of sublime nature and dramatic representations of human struggle against the overwhelming.¹⁶ Compared to Romantic art of the Industrial Revolution, my thesis work can also be seen as reactive against the negative social impacts of the Information Age. In contrast my work does not incorporate overtly dramatic compositional devices or subjects to convey meaning.

Realism attempted to lift social consciousness regarding the effects of the Industrial Revolution. Realist artworks sought to increase public awareness by authentically depicting the underclass workers of the time.¹⁷ In comparison to Realist art of the Industrial Revolution, my work similarly attempts to raise awareness regarding the negative social impacts of the Information Age. In contrast, my work employs idealistic rather than realistic depictions of subjects to communicate social content.

Late nineteenth century advances in photographic technology influenced artistic expression in the early twentieth century. Art forms of this time varied in particular aesthetic responses to the mechanization of society. Comparisons of my thesis work with the art movements of Cubism, and Futurism serve to further orient its' relation to historical artwork influenced by technology.

The painting movement of Cubism diverted from the representational depictions produced through photographic technology. Cubist artwork portrayed deconstructed depictions of subjects from multiple viewpoints simultaneously in same composition.¹⁸ Cubist art led to the integration of technologically produced collage materials such as newspaper clippings in paintings. The approaches of Cubism addressed the manner in which a technological society processed visual information. Conceptually, Cubism offered a divergent view of the world that reacted to and commented on the status quo ideology of the time. Similarly, my work presents a non-normative conceptual perspective from which to view ITs' influence on social ideology during my time.

Unlike Cubism, Futurism embraced machine technology as a positive social force. Futurist art depicted the integration of humans with attributes of mechanized technology

environments. Idealistically, the Futurists sought to dispense with Old World cultural paradigms and to create a new culturally cleansed society of modernity.¹⁹

In contrast to Futurism, my work does not promote IT as an absolutely positive social force. Rather my paintings depict human/technology hybridization to critique an unbalanced social engagement with technology. Conceptually, my work cautions against the reckless embrace of the new at the expense of the historically beneficial.

Contemporary Technology Related Art

In the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries IT has made a great impact as an artistic force itself. A quick search on Google will reveal multiple links to the top digital artists in the world. IT-related art work is a common feature of the contemporary artistic mainstream. Examination of such contemporary trends offers comparisons for conceptually orienting my work within this context.

"Mashup Art" is a relatively new art form related to IT. This term originated as a label for musical art created by appropriating digitized expressions of different cultural art forms and genres from different time periods, and combining them together into a single artwork. The capacity of digital visual technology allowed this approach to translate to still graphic and video art as well. In recent years, digitized appropriation art, derived through the use of IT as a primary artistic medium, has received support of the art establishment. This type of art has been consistently exhibited in prominent venues including New York's Museum of Modern Art.²⁰

A recent article in Art News magazine explains how contemporary collage artists are including digital technologies as media components of their work. As forms of Mashup Art new kinds of collage often incorporate the visual attributes of multiple cultural genres in single works. Approaches of this type reference the simultaneous manner in which visual imagery is

presented and processed in contemporary IT culture. However, being actual objects instead of simulated images, these collage works offer opportunities for prolonged viewing experiences that the constant flux of IT visual imaging systems does not.²¹ Similarly my paintings comment on the nature of IT-related visual information processing through a real-world format that lends itself to extended viewing.

Although Mashup Art finds its origin in the ability of digital technology to integrate a variety of cultural art forms, it is not necessary for an artwork to be created through digital means for it to be considered a Mashup. The term Mashup can be applied to any artwork in any media that intentionally combines complimentary attributes of different cultural genres. Mashup Art is an extremely popular contemporary artistic form and works range conceptually from whimsical parodies to serious cultural statements.

Examination of the expanded definition of this type of art reveals that my thesis work can also be considered a form of Mashup Art. My work does not use IT as a primary artistic medium as do musical, video and still digital graphic Mashup forms. However, a central attribute of my work is the integration of different cultural imagery and symbols from different time periods to convey social meaning.

Certainly not all relevant modern art forms relate directly to IT. Still the contemporary use of digital media in the arts remains in vogue. The list of visual artists incorporating these technologies in their work is too numerous to accurately count. In general, the pervasive use of IT in the arts is more influential in my art than are the works of specific artists using such media. However, examining the artists Sandro Kopp and Nam June Paik, both of whom incorporate IT in their works, has been helpful in clarifying important attributes of my own work.

The painter Sandro Kopp serves as an example of an artist who employs a practical balance with IT and artistic approach. Kopp utilizes digital media as a support tool for producing more traditional artistic work. Specifically, Kopp makes traditional portrait paintings using paint, brushes, and models. However, instead of painting from live models or photographs, he paints his subjects using Skype images of them on a computer screen as a reference for rendering. This approach allows the artist and model to synchronize a time for portraiture without requiring both to be in the same physical location.²¹

Kopp offers a refreshing example of IT equilibrium in a society dominated by an excessive substitution of the technological for the time-honored. In my thesis work I have chosen intentionally not to use IT as a primary artistic media. I believe that doing so would be contradictory to my message. However, my message is about examining the overuse of IT, not about discrediting its use entirely. With this in mind, I have endeavored to maintain a serviceable relationship with digital media within my own art-making process. I, like Kopp, utilize IT as a tool to support more traditional artistic methods.

Beyond what I have gained through the examination of Skype portraiture, I have also gathered insight about my own work through another artist who used IT as a primary media. The Korean American Artist Nam June Paik (1923 - 2006), was incredibly influential in the use of IT as artistic media. Paik's use of television and video technologies in the mid and latter twentieth century to create sculptures and installations was ground breaking. He is commonly considered the "founder of video art" within the artistic mainstream.²³

Nam June Paik is arguably the most influential IT artist in history. His work ushered in a new age of artworks applying IT as a primary artistic media. His impact remains remarkably

evident in the dawn of the new millennium. This relatively new approach to art-making has become a reflection of the manner in which IT permeates the modern world beyond the arts.

In relation to my own work, what I find most interesting about Paik is that his views on technology deviated from my initial assumptions. Because he so extensively utilized IT as the principal media of choice in his own work, I would have expected him to be a zealous supporter of its use in society. However, Paik was reflective about the use of technology in human life and cautioned against the potential dangers of its overreliance. Furthermore, he endorsed a reasonable interface between the technological and the natural.²⁴ Certainly, the body of Paik's work was not overtly intended to raise awareness to the negative attributes of IT. However, his views regarding technology exhibit a deep consideration of its social impact.

In accordance with Paik, I also support a balanced societal interaction with IT. My thesis work is motivated by a desire to influence reflection regarding its overuse. The seemingly contradictory relationship between Paik's art and his views regarding technology gives me pause to reconsider the complexity of the issue. A high level of individual IT interaction may not in all cases be exclusive to beliefs promoting its moderate use in society at large. The abuse of IT is a social issue that deserves attention. However, blanketing all users as potentially excessive offenders seems an inaccurate and unhelpful assessment of social conditions.

CONCLUSION

In my personal aesthetic investigation of ITs' social impact, I have become more empathetic regarding the mass engagement with digital media systems. It seems to me that the captivating nature of this interaction is motivated by genuinely human urges including the desire to be valued, to find meaning in the world, and to feel a sense of personal control in the midst of the externally overwhelming. However, I do not believe that digitized remedies can authentically satiate such human needs. Rather it seems that the socially established reliance on simulated experiences to satisfy human urges contributes to the insatiable societal appetite for mediated satisfaction. Instead of vilifying the afflicted, I have chosen to facilitate reflection and raise awareness.

I have used art as a way to speak my piece about social trends in the contemporary world that concern me. Making art has helped me to be more thoughtful about the culture in which I live. Through my art I offer possibilities for others to reflect. My work references not only my personal observations but also what current research reveals regarding the negative social impacts of IT. The question remains as to how such knowledge will affect the manner in which society interfaces with digital media. My hope is that increased understanding will lead to a more far-sighted perception of IT and more prudent and balanced patterns of its use.

In general, social commentary art like mine indicates that something is wrong with the commonly held picture of the world. In so doing it opens a window for social consciousness to address the issues presented. Even so, questions arise regarding the effectiveness of art as a medium to raise social awareness. To what extent can art change the indoctrinated beliefs and behavior patterns of a society? Raising awareness at all seems a daunting task, given the

immense influence that conformist social power structures have in determining the conduct of contemporary life experience.

If I intend for the message in my work to be acknowledged I must consider what the best method for spreading it will be. I do believe that viewing my actual paintings is helpful in supporting the central message of the work because it promotes direct interactions with real-world objects rather than simulated representations. However, exhibiting the actual works in gallery settings will expose them to only a relatively small and select audience.

Trusting that the work's message is relevant to a larger demographic fosters consideration of alternative presentation options. One ubiquitous characteristic of the IT society is communication through visual message systems. Taking into account the digitized nature of visual communication in the modern world, spreading the message of my work to a mass audience will most likely require the use of IT platforms.

To this end I have uploaded image files of my work to a Web site using a popular artist domain provider. Yet, choosing this course has raised the question of whether using an IT image delivery system diminishes the authenticity of the work's message. In addition, will an audience that uses digitized systems to view art really be receptive to a message cautioning against the misguided use of such technologies?

With these questions in mind, I look at the potential impact of my art as a vehicle for raising social awareness in terms of message legitimacy and audience receptivity. If a message has inherent value to all potential receivers, beyond particular prejudices that may inhibit receptivity, it is worth sending. Furthermore, in the modern world the fact remains that no messages will be received unless they are sent.

FIGURES



Fig. 1. Charles Luna. *Neogenesis*. 2012. Oil on canvas, 36" x 60".



Fig. 2. Charles Luna. *Common Ground*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 42" x 56".



Fig. 3. Charles Luna. *Salvation*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 48" x 36"



Fig. 4. Charles Luna. *Communion*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 42" x 60".

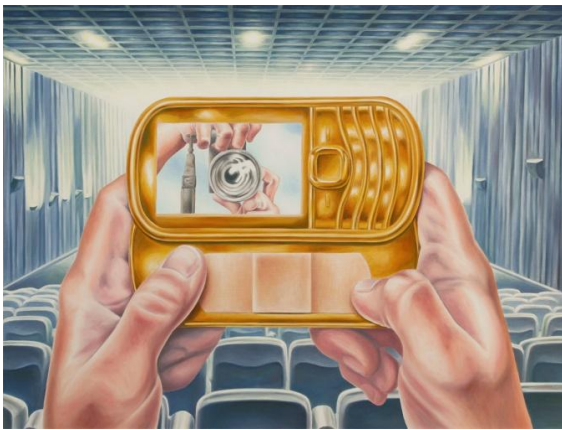


Fig. 5. Charles Luna. *Validation*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 36" x 48".



Fig. 6. Charles Luna. *i of the Beholder*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 56" x 42".



Fig. 7. Charles Luna. *Connection*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 48" x 36".



Fig. 8. Charles Luna. *Technotopia*. 2012. Oil on canvas, 36" x 36".



Fig. 9. Charles Luna. *Wellspring*. 2012. Oil on canvas, 42" x 56".

NOTES

- ¹ Tony Dokoupil, *Is the Web Driving Us Mad?*, (Newsweek Magazine, June 9, 2012).
- ² Dokoupil, *Is the Web Driving Us Mad?*.
- ³ Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*, 241.
- ⁴ John Tierney, *Good News Beats Bad on Social Networks*, (The New York Times, March 19, 2013).
- ⁵ Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*, 123.
- ⁶ Anahad O'Connor, *Distracted American Drivers*, (The New York Times, March 19, 2013).
- ⁷ Morozov, *The Pearls of Perfection*, (The New York Times, March 3, 2013).
- ⁸ Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1998), 110.
- ⁹ Carolina A. Miranda, *Camera Ready?*, (Art News, May 2013), 40-41.
- ¹⁰ Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutions*, (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2013) xiv.
- ¹¹ Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutions*, 322.
- ¹² Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutions*, 200.
- ¹³ <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-english/>
- ¹⁴ <http://www.owlandbear.com/2010/04/16/interview-ron-english/>
- ¹⁵ Jessie B. Wilder, *Art History for Dummies* (New Jersey: Wiley Publishing Inc., 2007), 229 - 238.
- ¹⁶ Wilder, *Art History for Dummies*, 239 - 250.
- ¹⁷ Wilder, *Art History for Dummies*, 250 -256.
- ¹⁸ Wilder, *Art History for Dummies*, 303 - 308.
- ¹⁹ Wilder, *Art History for Dummies*, 309 - 311.
- ²⁰ Douglass Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group Inc., 2013), 155.
- ²¹ Rachel Wolff, *The New Collage*. (Art News, December 2013), 60-67.
- ²² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/31/painted-pixels-sandro-kopp_n_1244746.html
- ²³ <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artist/?id=3670>
- ²⁴ <http://mydesignstories.com/nam-june-paik-the-father-of-video-art/>

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