

BRACKETED



Robert Stanley

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W.A.Koehnline Museum

Oakton College, Des Plaines, IL

June 12-July11, 2002

Computers “vs.” Painting?



Computers—can they really make art? No—artists make art. Paints alone can’t make art either. Both computer and paint are just media. Since computers are a recent addition to the artist’s toolbox, however, viewers often have difficulty knowing how to respond to computer art. Nonetheless, just as potatoes are potatoes whether fries or mashed, so art is art whether computer or paint.

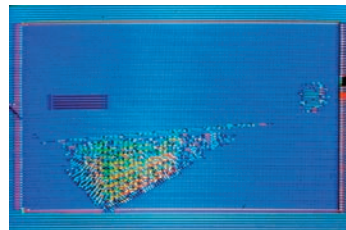
I. BEGINNINGS: IMITATION

The paintings and computer works resembled each other in the beginning. Although the paint medium was respected as paint and the computer as its own medium, the computer works usually fed off the paintings, as in Fossil of an End and Upend Thru. One time, a painting (Time Springs) fed off the computer (Wellspring 2). The experiment didn't last. While computer, being somewhat more distant and idealistic, could abstract from painting, a painting based on a computer work seemed too lifeless.



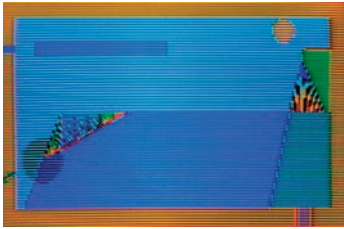
Fossil of an End
acrylic 32"x44"

With a border nearly the same as the inside area, separated by sunset-like colors, this painting suggested the inner and outer worlds, the known and unknown. Often, what happens outside the boundaries of senses or knowledge explodes or emerges gently into the current moment. Sun, moon, movement of whole continents, movement of love or fear -- all often begin out of the now, out past boundaries of perception.



Uppend Thru
computer Cibachrome print 8"x12"

This work had to be made by programming the computer (an Apple //e) because there were no graphic programs at the time. The colors and textures of paint, so helpful in suggesting the rich complexity of the world, were denied the programmer-artist. That is fitting, since computer should not try to look like acrylic paint any more that watercolor should look like oil paint. Instead, richness was created by making use of an accident of drawing lines on early computers: a kaleidoscope of colors could be created by programming the computer to draw lines in a certain way. The border in this print, like the painting *Fossil of an End*, suggests the inner and outer worlds, the known and unknown.



*Wellspring 2 computer
Cibachrome print 10"x8"*



*Time Springs
acrylic 36"x48"*

Kaleidoscope colors in places, colors made by “writing” different-colored lines next to each other, and accidental colors when one color butted up against another — all these were effects unique to the early computer. As a watercolorist has to go with the flow of his medium, enjoying and even somewhat controlling the accidents, so it was with the computer. It would take whole afternoons of trial and error, crowned by a monitor-gaze headache, to create just the right accident. *Wellspring 2* is a progression from the earlier, simpler computer works like *Upend Thru*. Yet, the same concerns of worlds beyond our ken are still there in the golden border outside the colors of earth, sky, sunlight, and water.

Cross fertilized from computer works in the *Wellspring* series, *Time Springs* picks up on the simple geometric shapes that were the only ones early computer code could produce. Seeing *Wellsprings 2* and *Time Springs* next to each other is something like seeing the same part played by two different actors. The same thing is said, but how it is said, and the subtleties suggested, are quite different.

The Zen-like idea of illusion and worlds beyond boundaries is suggested by shapes outside the border generating new shapes inside where they would intersect. Also, the right side of the yellow-orange triangle doesn't appear to lead the eye directly to the tip of the purple triangle across the painting, yet, it really does line up. Is it the eye or the brain that isn't telling the truth?

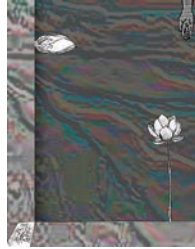
II. GOING THEIR OWN WAYS

The concerns might have been similar—perhaps the flow of energy through us and our universe, or the complex richness within a simple thing, a boundary of mystery—yet the way the paintings and computer works developed, each had a very different look. Both media and subject diverged.



Worlds
acrylic 48"x36"

Worlds moves away from a surrounding boundary and looks different than computer pieces from that time, such as *Enlightenment*. Shapes generated from the energy at the left edge of *Worlds* are more life-related. Whether nebula, parts of the human body, or some other — the shapes are a version of the Eastern yin-yang symbol of cycles. Some new colors are being used. An artist can repeat the delightful experience of childhood by growing and changing continually.



Enlightenment
computer, archival print 10"x8"

Differing from paintings of that time, *Enlightenment* was inspired by the hand when in the Buddhist teaching position. Original drawings are scanned in for the first time. Da Vinci contributes to the piece via a distorted drawing, linking this piece to his interest in science and, presumably, computers. An interest in randomness and order, or chaos theory, in science and human life inspired the subtly colored background.

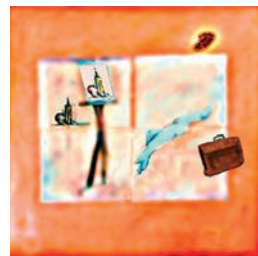
III. KINSHIP

Once again, as in the beginning, the pieces strongly influenced each other. Similar feelings are captured differently in each medium. The rich and subtle sadness of separation captured through acrylics in *Natural Vision, Lives* mutated in the computer work, *Lives View*, shifting to a harsher, more jarring presence. While most programs provide tools to imitate painting or drawing media, to use them is trifling, like trying to make a saw out of stone.



Natural Vision, Lives
acrylic 24"x24"

In previous works, colors had been getting warmer. Now, the glow comes through. The pleasant color is at odds with the subject matter, which some consider surreal. The objects depicted were actually real; and set up to mirror a mood being experienced. Frustration and beauty play roles. The leaf (a real leaf) above the central rectangle is an authentic presence in this painting about experiences of reality and painting. Boundaries may exist, but they are not as strong.



Lives View
computer archival print 8"x8"

Extremely close in subject matter and composition to *Natural Visions, Lives*, this piece speaks a very different language through its colors. These vibrant colors suggest a resurrection, a new life, hot, like the Phoenix that rose from a pile of ashes. The distanced objects in the painting *Natural Visions, Lives* have now been captured in the canvas on its easel. Formerly mysterious, dark objects are now flying away. This piece was actually done two years after the painting it drew from, and in some ways is more related to the later *Sunset Viscera* that it is to the next piece in this exhibit, *Presences*, which shares more of the psyche of the painting *Natural Vision, Lives*.

III. KINSHIP (cont'd)

A new trend began in Presences, which picked up on the sense of separation and color in Natural Vision, Lives, but ventured off into new subject matter.



Presences
computer, archival print 8"x10"

Presences is one of the earliest pieces to use scanned-in sketches and scanner experimentation (the face in the lower right corner). Close in theme to the spirit of separateness in the painting *Natural Visions, Lives*, this computer piece displays a field of objects that are often unpleasant, unexpectedly playing against alluring colors. The empty lawn chairs set up tensions. Have the people left, perhaps after an argument? Are they about to sit down together with cups of coffee? Is it sunrise? Sunset? A false dawn? It is challenging to keep an artwork that contains so many objects and ideas from looking like a spilled bucket of bolts.

IV. CROSS FERTILIZATION

With its red color, Sunset Viscera added a more impassioned mood to the sense of separation. This same mood fertilized the painting, Chiaroscuro. In these pieces, the artist's role—as both an almost-hidden presence and as a bridge between the world and the artwork—was a shared theme.



*Sunset Viscera
computer, archival print 13"x17"*

Art is seen differently by each person. An artist can hope that viewers sense the general aspect of an artwork. This piece has an air of waiting around and disassociation. The people are on a riverbank, with the sun setting. The photo cannot capture the real selves physical and mental insides of these people, represented by the reddish “figures” on the right side. The artist stands between what is superficially seen and what is really going on in the guts -- he (in outline form) straddles the material world of the people at sunset and the marrow of that world, their pulsing insides. The magenta “door” at the far left suggests yet more mysteries between surface reality and the visceral/spiritual.



*Chiaroscuro
acrylic 48"x36"*

*(Commentary by Nathan Harpaz,
Curator, William A. Koehnline Gallery)*

“In the tradition of the Chicago “Imagists”, Robert Stanley combines recognizable images together with abstract formations. Conceptually, he uses a technique that is similar to a collage, where the artist transfers an image from one context to another environment to create a new interpretation. It also resembles digital art (a medium that Stanley also practices) in its method of digital montage, where the artist uses the cut and paste technique... *Chiaroscuro* ...[has a] visceral feel in the red.”

IV. CROSS FERTILIZATION (cont'd)

Both Still Life and Stones and Mind explored this theme of artist and world, as an easel or easel's shadow was juxtaposed with real objects, whether still life and stones or woman's face (on table near easel).



Still Life and Stones
gouache on Arches 11"x14"



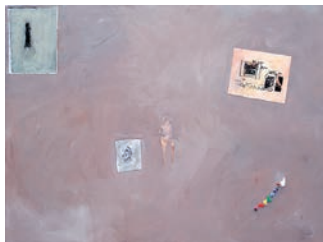
Mind
computer, Cibachrome print 10"x8"

The medium used in *Still Life and Stones*, gouache, does not have the punch that acrylic does. This small painting continues the themes of separate objects and the contrast between real and illusory worlds. The artist's role is also suggested by the shadow of the easel which emerges diagonally from the lower left. The stones, an incomplete formation of eleven, were painted from life. The head was painted from a sketch of a mannequin. The book was made up as it was painted. Perhaps there is a hint of the philosopher, contemplating and writing about reality, yet realizing that he perceives only shadows. The colors reflect a pensive mood, although the composition is unsettled.

Once again, an easel stands, inviting. The far wall and the floor of the artist's studio are a previous artwork. The chair and easel came from sketches. The can of brushes under the table and the table itself were painted using a computer graphics program. Only the table top contains a real image, and that image is distorted and in black and white. The subject of the image, a woman, is also working at an easel. The piece is jumping with angles and colors, differing slants on looking and on mental states.

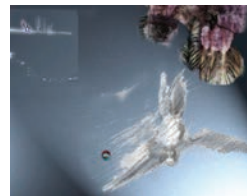
V. STEPPING OUT

Although more recent works share similar themes, these works have shown a greater diversity in look and subject matter. A feeling of loss inspired both At That Time and Now Sometimes, while the painting



*At That Time
acrylic 48"x36"*

The base color is gray. A man is barely discernible, sitting near the middle of the piece. Originally, he was an angel, resting with wings folded because he was worn out. Perhaps the starkness, pain, and confusion in the images around him made him tired. Each of the separate images has a story. Some seem evident; some are not. The unclear, more personal images give viewers room to participate in their own ways. As the eye travels around the piece, the arc of artist's colors becomes prominent. A question is suggested: how does this bright potential fit into the picture?



*Now Sometimes
computer, archival print 7"x9"*

A person falls, as if from the sky. The overall color in this work is lovely, but the upper right holds disturbing color and shapes. Falling from? To? Left of the figure floats a color enhanced image of the most elemental things in our world, the energy clouds of an atom. These simple images are thrown together so the artwork's maker and its other makers, the viewers, could sort out whether there is sense to the world, or just mystery.

V. STEPPING OUT (cont'd)

Inverse/Converse saw loss and hollowness as more fleeting and less sad. The computer work *Proportions* and the painting *Curious About* contrast an ambiguous, floating female figure with a sense of order and enigmatic light.



Inverse/Converse
acrylic 18"x18"

A gray covers most of the canvas in *Inverse/Converse*, but the edges glow. The gray itself is textured and rich, like boiling clouds. The work was inspired by a ribbon floating in the air above a road. Its movement is now frozen in time. You can never step into the same river twice. The ribbon has taken on a dancing, almost frivolous feeling, contrasting with its grayness. With a painting-within-a-painting theme, the nearly empty white canvas rectangle near the bottom waits for the artist to try to capture the moment.



Proportions
computer, archival print 7"x9"

Images and drawings of personal interest were collected from a sketchbook, and then put together to see what they inspired as they bumped up against each other. In *Proportions*, the golden section and the nautilus-like spiral it generates suggests birth from death, universes and people from dead leaves. The mystery posed by the dark palette and distant horizon contrasts with the certainty that modern technology provides in the weather radar image (near the bottom).



Curious About
acrylic 48"x60"

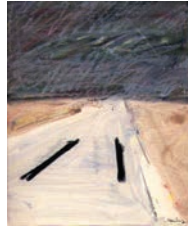
(Commentary by Nathan Harpaz, Curator, William A. Koehnline Gallery)

"The painting *Curious About* is a continuation of the painting *Chiaroscuro*. *Curious About* was brought into being by leafing through a sketchbook for drawings that struck the artist. There must be some connection between the three sketched images chosen, but Stanley tries not to think about one at the beginning. He'd rather that the idea of what the painting is about gradually evolve as he is doing it.

"Of course, sitting in my mind are pictures of previous paintings I've done, especially the most recent avenues I'm exploring. '*Chiaroscuro*,' with its visceral feel in the red, was in my mind at the time.' (R. S.)

"After he picked the images, he let them stew for a while, perhaps

Both Van Gogh, *I Know* and *Bracketed* step out in different ways from the small oil, *Study: Skid Marks*.



Study: Skid Marks
oil on illustration board 10"x8"

(cont'd.)

three days. Then he made some thumbnail sketches of how he might compose the painting. It turned out that the one he chose was modified as he painted, the female figure not descending, but floating. 'What really prompted me to get going and make the thumbnails was seeing the sunlight shining through the canvas. That brightness 'clicked,' giving a reason for the more somber parts of the piece that I was not happy with up to that point. (R.S.)

"The recognizable images (in the sketches) such as the curious dog, the bright flower and vase, and the female nude were all sketched from life. As Stanley worked on the piece, some got turned around. He sketched them onto the canvas and changed it."

This small oil was used in a painting, *Van Gogh, I Know*, and a computer piece, *Bracketed*. It captures an ambiguous moment: driving along towards a threatening sky, while skid marks appear immediately ahead. Both the event and the feeling really happened.



Van Gogh, I Know
acrylic 18"x18"

In the painting, *Van Gogh, I Know*, the threatening sky originally painted in *Study: Skid Marks*, takes on the coloring of some Van Gogh paintings. There is also a hint of his *Wheatfield with Crows*, painted just before his suicide. His dark experiences, amid the beauty of the world around him and the beauty of his own paint, are honored in this work.

V. STEPPING OUT (cont'd)

The tree that appears on the right side of *Bracketed* is an example of the intertwining of computer and other media. This tree, although dead, began as a pencil sketch suggesting nobility and hope of rebirth. Later, the sketch was scanned into the computer and worked on to deepen the sense of imminent hope (*Tree Prayer*). *Tree Prayer* then became an oil study (not in this exhibit), which was then reinterpreted in the computer work *Bracketed*. ***Mashed or fried, it's still potatoes.***



Tree Prayer
laserprint 10"x8"

The tree that appears in *Tree Prayer* and on the right side of *Bracketed* is an example of the intertwining of computer and other media. This tree began as a pencil sketch, expressing the stature of the dead tree and a hope of rebirth. Later, the sketch was scanned into the computer and worked with, to deepen the sense of imminent hope. The light edges/borders hint at light; the high contrast suggests strength.



Bracketed
computer, archival print 11"x14"

Bracketed stands as a strong intertwining of computer and other media. It uses a tree that appeared in *Tree Prayer*. This tree went from sketch to computer, to sketch scan, and finally back to computer. Part of *Bracketed* came from a sculpture that was photographed, then composited in the image. *Study: Skid Marks* began as an oil painting before ending up in this computer work. Some drawing and some digital photos also are used. Painting, computer sketch, sculpture—what begins where and which ends where are becoming wonderfully mixed marvels.

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