HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Tracing a Path from Cubism to Digital Art

by Jillian Steinhauer on April 2, 2013   3 💬   f Like ⟨100 g +1 ⟨ 1   🐦 Tweet ⟨38

I first learned about Cubism in an art history class my sophomore year of college. I remember the moment of revelation, after reading a lot about it but still failing to grasp what exactly Picasso and Braque were after. In the darkened lecture hall one afternoon, our teacher summed it up this way: how sparingly could you paint a face while still having the viewer understand it as a face? What was the bare minimum required for representation? As legend has it, these questions and the art they inspired changed the course of art history forever.

Is the same true of the digital revolution? Are widespread computer and internet usage changing the way we make art and understand the world? The answer to those questions is undoubtedly "yes," and that affirmative is the starting point for *Decenter*, a physical and virtual exhibition curated by Andrianna Campbell and Daniel S. Palmer at the Abrons Arts Center. Celebrating in a refreshingly forward-thinking way the centennial of the Armory Show, which unleashed Cubism on the US in 1913, *Decenter* features 27 artists "who explore the changes in perception precipitated by our digital age and who closely parallel the Cubist vernacular of fragmentation, nonlinearity, simultaneity, and decenteredness," the curators write. As Cubism was to the 20th century, then, so digital and digitally inspired art are to the 21st.
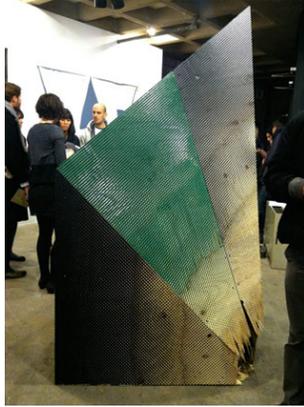
Michael Delucia, "Glint" (2012)

It's a plausible premise, and the curators seem to first make their case by highlighting the aesthetic overlap of the two movements, a connection I was surprised I hadn't made before. Geometric planes and the breaking up of images into squares (cubes) abound in both, as does a dogged interest in the manipulation of flatness and depth. This comes through especially in the physical-space exhibition of *Decenter*, at Abrons. Upstairs, one room features an excellent pair of paintings by Gabriel Orozco that filter flowers through pixels, while nearby Andrew Kuo has transformed the actions and elements of a single day into a beautifully blocky, nonsensical chart.

Gabriel Orozco, "Broken Red Flower" (2011)

Across the way, Franklin Evans has taken over a wedge-shaped staircase landing with one of his patented installations, in which colorful panels of images and words are laid out, strung up, and

connected intermittently with tape, like the contents of someone's mind (or computer, or the two as one) exploded into bits. In an adjacent space, a sculpture by Michael Delucia, who creates his geometric forms in enamel and plywood using software and a computer-guided router, brings the concept and practice of digital abstraction into three dimensions.


Franklin Evans, "Bluenudedissent" (2013)

All of these works, as well as a handful more at the center, succeed in not just transmitting a digital aesthetic but imposing it on the viewer, pushing our eyes and minds into different modes of perception. But much of the art in *Decenter*'s physical show — including good, solid pieces by David Kennedy Cutler, Douglas Melini, and Liz Magic Laser — feels digitally inflected (or affected) rather than truly immersed in the digital, which means the connections with Cubism feel mostly superficial, confined to diagonal lines and fragmented planes.

That's less the case in the online exhibition, where the gleefully chaotic network of artists and artworks you encounter immediately

points to the vastness of our digital moment. Although not all of the works here are digital — click on some, and you'll simply see an image of a painting or installation, which can be confusing and disappointing. Some of the digital works, too, are boring, or at least don't outlive the neat factor; how many geometrically abstract looping animations or GIFs can you watch before growing restless?
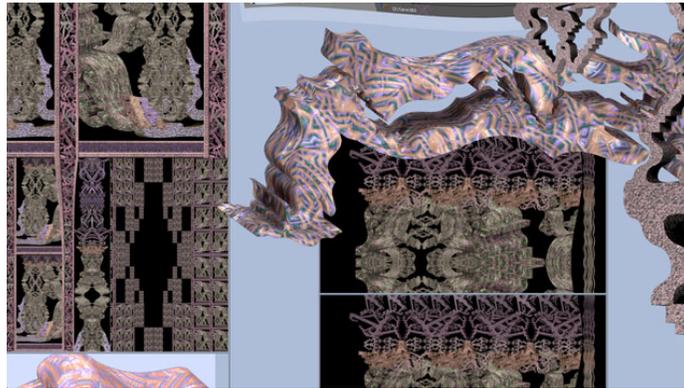

Screen shot of Brenna Murphy, "Latticescanr" (2013)

A number of pieces here, however, are outstanding. They point to the ways in which artists are not just making art about or on the internet but tapping into and transmitting a profound shift in visual culture, in much the same way that the Cubists did. Perhaps the best of these is Brenna Murphy's "Latticescanr" (2013), a never-ending network of pages filled with images and GIFs of abstract forms that generally look like a cross between sea coral and ancient Incan or Aztec sculptures, sometimes accompanied by ominous electronic tones. "Latticescanr" is an online maze, a kind of digital architecture that's profoundly unsettling because there's no prescribed way to navigate it.

Other standouts include James Bridle's "Rorschmap" (2013), which turns the logic of Google Maps on its head by transforming sites into Rorschach-like mirror images that you can expand or contract with your arrow keys, and Jennifer Chan's "Grey Matter" (2012), which mashes up pop culture, net art, and teen-girl online

aesthetics into a overloaded diaristic video that questions what privacy and sharing mean in the age of social media. Joe Hamilton's "An Illusion of Democratic Experience" (2012) presents a series of virtual collages, many of the image snippets seemingly drawn from art historical canvases, as rotating slides in a slide show, which is set to the sounds of a clicking projector and people talking and wandering in a vast hall. Listen for a while and you'll envision the Great Hall of the Met and begin thinking about how the internet has supplanted the encyclopedic museum as the profferer of the great democratic visual experience.
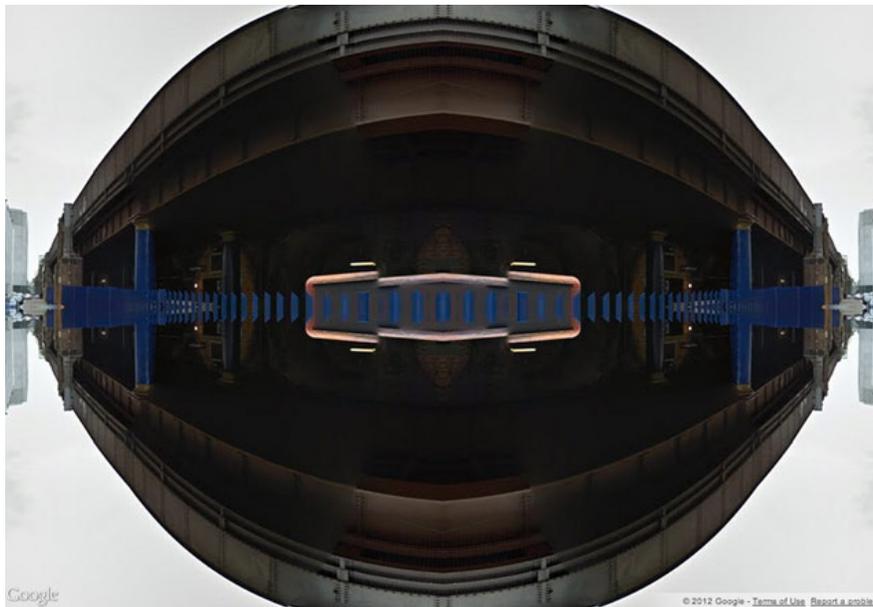
Screen shot of James Bridle, "Rorschmap" (2013)

These pieces offer up digitalness as more than just a style or a new aesthetic, and in that sense, they make for case Campbell's and Palmer's thesis. And yet, there's one sticking point I keep coming back to: Cubism was a revolution within art that ostensibly had a broader cultural impact; the digital revolution, meanwhile, is a societal change that's been shaking up art. In that sense, digital art began as a reaction, whereas Cubism is hailed as a catalyst — which leads me to wonder if visual art has the power to spark such widespread change anymore (if it really ever did). In the end, though, I suppose it doesn't entirely matter, so long as the artists

who are leading the way into uncharted territory are the ones who are remembered when the present becomes history.

Decenter: An Exhibition on the Centenary of the 1913 Armory Show *continues at Abrons Arts Center (466 Grand Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through April 7. The* online exhibition *will stay up longer, until a yet-to-be-determined date.*