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Is Digital Art Upstaged by its Own Medium?

Some art historians have pointed to collage as the most significant development in the visual arts between the camera (19th century) and the computer (20th century). This notion was the basis of an exhibition, “A Collage and Assemblage Invitational,” fall 2010, in the Dordt College Campus Center Art Gallery. The exhibition demonstrated a convergence of traditional techniques and computer technology as featured in the work of five artists: Roy R. Behrens, Mary Synder Behrens, David Robert Kamm, Daniel Weiss, all from Iowa, and John Washington, a graphic designer, from the United Kingdom. From this exhibition, Dordt College acquired a digitally produced piece titled Nautilus Bridge 2004, by Roy Behrens, for its permanent art collection, and the Department of Art and Design received the digital print series Smallfins, by John Washington, from the Behrenses.

As curator, I select the exhibiting artists on the criterion that their works evoke a certain quality—what Richard Mouw insightfully describes as “intimate empathy-invoking.” In his book He Shines in All That’s Fair, Mouw explains this aspect of common grace in conjunction with the antithesis of sin and grace:

Kuyper then explains the effects of such common grace: “when international communication is

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improved, the arts flourish, the sciences increase our understanding, the conveniences and joys of life multiply, all expressions of life become more vital and radiant, forms become more refined, and the general image of life becomes more winsome.”

This description seems to correlate, in our era, with the advent and potential of digital technology as artistic medium for aesthetic applications. Similarly, in the case of Behrens and Washington, the formal strategy of their artwork is complex, and their images have intended meaning and authorship.

This paper finds such examples of common grace in its brief study of select pieces from the digital collages of Roy Behrens and John Washington. Both Behrens and Washington are artists who respond allusively to tensions between the technical aspects of digital images and the intention of the artists making their art. In other words, characteristic of their autobiographical pieces are constructed images, which allude to the intrinsic tension between the computer (and software) as an artistic medium and the artist’s conventional hand tools. There is no question that digital collage is an established and accepted medium; however, this paper tries to expand our appreciation of the expressive potential of images that are made with the computer. Digital collage is still a fairly new medium that visualizes binary numerical data and computational systems with the potential of expressing highly personal artistic work.

John Washington, a senior lecturer in graphic design at the University of Bolton, Preston, UK, where he also teaches digital media and e-learning strategies, finds digital collage to be an imaginative and intellectual medium that lends itself to the development of very special artistic results. His series of ten collages, titled Smallfinds, is about remembrance, memory and mortality. Unsurprisingly, it was completed following the death of his father in 2008. The entire Smallfinds series is a kind of memoir of Washington’s father.

Roy R. Behrens—who teaches graphic design, illustration, and design history at the University of Northern Iowa; was nominated for a National Design Award, sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution; authored several books, including Camoupedia: A Compendium of Research on Art, Architecture and Camouflage as well as False Colors: Art, Design and Modern Camouflage; and has taught at art schools and universities for nearly forty years—says, “As a person who delights in teaching, I purposefully make no distinction between my classroom teaching and my studio work.” In Behrens’ case, that work is an amalgamation of research, writing, exhibiting, and designing: “I learn from students every day, and then use what I gain from them to inform and strengthen whatever I do. . . . Specific
techniques and styles of art are faddish, and of little or no importance to me, while the form of a work is enduring.”

Apparently there is tension in working with digital media, according to Professor Behrens, who writes this in his blog, The Poetry of Sight: “Earlier this year, I saw online for the first time a suite of collages created by John Washington . . . [I was greatly impressed by this series, in part because, while they appear to have been made by hand (through traditional cut-and-paste methods), they were instead constructed entirely on a computer.” Behrens is not implying that digital collage needs to be or should ultimately look and feel like traditional cut and paste collages. He believes that even though an artist doesn’t get her hands dirty with the material, genuine work is still being accomplished. Behrens is essentially open to all modes of media (hand skills and computer skills) to make art and assist the design process. As Behrens writes at the end of his blog piece, “John Washington’s work is a reminder that we do not yet appreciate the expressive potential of images that are made on a computer.”

In his thesis for Smallfinds, which is published online, John Washington articulates the frustration when viewers remark that a digital collage looks like something else—an antique or retro-style photograph, for instance. Washington states, “The use of simile to describe digital images is arguably the cause of much tension amongst those digital artists who go to great lengths to maintain an analogue visual aesthetic. Digital artists working within traditional genres such as collage or photography clearly have a problem: they generally do not want their images overshadowed by the medium itself.” Referring to Marshall McLuhan’s “the medium is the message,” perhaps we are shaped by the tools we use, and the digital medium itself has the potential to upstage the message.

Washington uses the word “remediation” to further explain his point. “Remediation,” the term coined by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin in a book by the same name, published in 1999, basically combines two ideas (or logics): One is “immediacy,” referring to media that is hidden or disguised. The other idea is “Hypermedia,” referring to “media itself” that is vital to the message. As Washington describes it, “In an ideal world, digital collages that visually resemble traditional collage would not be described by a simile: its process would be transparent, but in reality, its very nature and the context of how digital collage is usually viewed makes it a hypermediated activity.”

Washington’s collage series, as he says, “are reflections, using source images of family photographs, letters, and other documents.” He suggests that these images are a theoretically driven presentation, which may sound clinical and business-like, but actually the result is a very personal memorial to his father—so plausible that the viewer, at times, feels like a voyeur. Perhaps Washington helps to alleviate this tendency by revealing a touching “old boy” sentiment throughout the series. The project title, Smallfinds, suggests an archeological dig, according to Behrens; and in finding old relics, Washington the archivist is trying to analyze and discover the significance of these findings. From a database of collected images or “components,” as Washington calls them, he layers these images with finesse and subject sensitivity. It seems that each layer is residue that reveals, through partial transparency, something remaining, informing the viewer about the depth of personality and complexity of Washington’s father. In this series the medium and the message converge to produce poignant images, particularly when the viewer knows that the series commemorates the passing and loss of a loved one.

For Washington, this series was a challenge to produce, from both an emotional and psychological standpoint. As Washington researched the project, he read Susan Sontag’s book On Photography. In a particular passage Sontag writes, “To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability” by specifically “slicing” out a reminder or a remembrance. With these words in mind, Washington mentions, “The image chosen was the most difficult for me to construct. It was taken a few days before he passed away and I sensed impending doom in his expression.” Washington’s primary worry about using digital images and Photoshop collage techniques for this project had to do with maintaining truth, integrity, and solemnity of the subject. During the project, Washington has ascer-
tained the following concerns about digital media:

1. Much of today's digital art and photography is characterized by pastiche and nostalgia.

2. The personality of digital photography has come to signify the technical ability of editing to enhance pictures with a variety of preset artistic special effects that are used for hyperbolic impact in order to astonish the viewer. Imaging software filters can produce quasi-visual effects, which can “overshadow” actual insight. As a result, perhaps the major issue is whether digital images have generated a stereotype in which it may be inappropriate to use for sensitive subject matter.

3. The paradox of post photography, in other words, the logic of a digital image tears down the conventional photographic medium while glorifying and immortalizing the photographic image through computerized effects.14

For Washington’s family, living in postwar England meant doing without basic things, whose absence made his life difficult. In Washington’s piece, this deprivation is indicated by the scanned images of food rationing coupon books. Washington further elaborates on the digital print, pictured above:

The piston simply represents the mechanical nature of the heart of course. It is metaphorical, symbolic and literal, I guess. My most vivid memories of my father were from my school days. … He was always “fixing cars” and the tools and components depicted were solidified in my memory. But little did he know that he had inherited a body that was to need constant medical attention (fixing, as he put it) and this is how I saw my dad. He used to think of doctors as mechanics and so it all tied together. The components were all scanned from the same AA book of the car; it was a kind of bible at the time.15

Digital objects are comprised of coded data built with mathematical systems. Interestingly, Washington discovered in the course of the project that numerical data is not necessarily depersonalized material. A pixel is the visualization of the smallest components and units of data, which help contribute to the flat and graphic character of digital media. Whether analog or digital, both are mediums as well as materials in which the artist works to form images. Whether physical or abstract, both ultimately, through the abilities of the artist, can form a compelling visual artifact. However, all photographic mediums—analog or digital—can be appropriate images that convey significant reminders of personal and emotive memories.

By contrast, Nautilus Bridge, 2004, by artist, designer, and writer Roy R. Behrens, suggests an antique book opened to a two-page spread, in which the artist invites the viewer (perhaps in jest) to “read” the composition as if it were a narrative, reinforced by the fact that photographs are usually associated with books or with albums. Perhaps the image of the postage stamp is indicating that Behrens, like any other good graphic designer, is sending us messages. Traditionally, the medium of collage is a free association of meaningful but seemingly ambiguous images. However, Behrens carefully constructs and arranges his compositions for greater impact by playing with images that may have multiple meanings. For example, Behrens uses the compelling image of Portrait of a Lady, by the Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden, painted circa 1460, in this case a digital reproduction of the small panel.16 Behrens accentuates the vivid juxtaposition of the positive rendition by developing a dichotomy with the blue or analytic x-ray, which as a negative reveals the subject’s face.

Behrens examines the concise geometric shapes of Van der Weyden’s Gothic style forms, which emphasize the classic lines of the head, headdress, neckline, hands and shoulders by celebrating the light that illumines the subject’s facial features. Indeed, the darkness creates the intensity of light that enhances the nautilus as a meta-
phoric and literal placement on the bridge of the nose that works to veil and conceal the lady’s face. The nautilus shell is considered an ornamental curiosity, a luxury item, particularly in the context of art history. Throughout his composition, Behrens emphasizes the flatness of space with the illusion of drop shadows and shading that is conveniently produced with digital special effects.

In addition, the cross-section of a nautilus shell displays chambers arranged in a logarithmic spiral. These compartments can be thought of as self-similar shapes. In biology, as John Sharp writes, “Such a shape arises because a growing animal has the same proportions as it grows and the spiral fits the requirement to protect this shape as it gets larger.”17 In mathematics, a self-similar shape can be exactly or approximately similar to a part of itself. Interestingly, self-similarity is a typical property of pixels and fractals. Pixels are the basic component of digital images. A digital image is information based on algorithmic computations within a matrix of digital codes in a data space. Pixels are self-similar because they stay the same shape under all scale and resolution transformations on the computer screen. Fractals are self-similar as fractional dimensions of pixels, which can help render finer image resolutions and subtle color shades through subdivisions.18

Behrens appreciates naturally found shapes and proportions, as they correlate with visual design elements. For Behrens, the nautilus spiral is a still-life symbol of an organic structural effect. Such an effect underlines an analogy for his compositional layout system of regular or irregular visual patterns.

The word “bridge,” in the title of the piece, becomes a humorous word play and visual pun that acknowledges Behrens’s proclivity to appreciate word and letter patterns as found in palindromes, rhymes, poems, and limericks. Referring to the importance of letters, Kurt Schwitters, the quintessential collage artist of the twentieth century, once said, “Not the word but the letter is the original material of poetry.”19 Likewise, in Nautilus Bridge Behrens incorporates the recurrence of “typographic elements”: those vertical and horizontal dashes, pulse signs, circles and half circles—the things he describes as “visual rhymes,” which purposely show, when combined with other elements, the effect of similarity grouping, proximity grouping, and spatial alignment. Edge alignment, or good continuity, according to Behrens, is the innate tendency for viewers to see things that look alike and belong together. This tendency to connect similar objects is reinforced in graphic design by a system that suggests an implied tartan grid. In other words, it is through a spatial alignment of similar elements that a cohesive composition is formed. As Behrens has stated in his essays “Art, Design and Gestalt Theory,”

Underlying this composition of typographic and pictorial elements is an implied grid system, an arrangement of intersecting lines that resembles Oriental lattice patterns and plaid fabrics, like those illustrated in Arthur Dow’s “Composition.” As anticipated by gestalt theory, edges that align in space appear to belong together.20

The spread does follow a notional grid, but the pictorial elements never seem subservient to it. It seems that for Behrens, the grid reinforces the guiding principles of order and complexity that result in interesting and delightful spatial patterns. Thinking of the nautilus shell as something figurative highlights nature as the basis for the science of visual perception principles. These are the principles that underlie compositional design, as found in Gestalt psychology.

Finally, the composition of Nautilus Bridge uses a background photograph of Pittsburgh in 1907 to help unify the two-page spread.21 Metaphorically, this background seems very appropriate for a city that is defined by the confluence of three rivers,
resulting in a multitude of bridges that literally connect the community. The bridge symbolically alludes to collage and to the French word “coller,” meaning “to glue.” Behrens connects and correlates all the visual elements of color, line, shapes, values, and textures by bridging together all the diversity in a mastery of formal activity. This piece is a reminder to art and design students of the adage about visual perception and learning to see: seeing the whole, seeing the parts of the whole, and seeing the whole within the whole.

As Schwitters explains, “The work of art comes into being through the artistic evaluation of its elements.”22 In conclusion, the collages of John Washington and Roy Behrens are emotive primarily because they thoughtfully and astutely consider the evaluation of visual elements and sources of digital materials. While their pieces rely somewhat on parody and imitation for impact, they do so without ridicule. When Washington and Behrens use sources, they are conscientious and respectful of the significance that these components have acquired over time. In this way their collages are records, contributions to a history. Through their attentive and deliberate use of older image sources, both Washington and Behrens, as digital artists, have the unique ability to rejuvenate the collage genre with contemporary importance and meaning.

Endnotes
7. Ibid.