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(Re)solution

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(RE)SOLUTION

A Thesis

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Agricultural and Mechanical College
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in

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by

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Abstract

This thesis report explains the process of creating the work in *(Re)solution*. The relationship between transferred digital prints and paint is described in relation to the intent of the work. Finally, there is a discussion of the questions and dilemmas posed by the working process as well as the completed work.

(Re)solution

(Re)solution is the culmination of a year-long project of grappling with questions surrounding the relationship between painting and digital imagery. The work evidences experimentation and problem solving instigated by the combination of an unusual process with an established and traditional one. Inquiries have largely lead to more questions and I hope that the viewer will become engaged with the mysteries and dilemmas posed by the paintings.

The Transferred Digital Print

The work results from a multi-phased process that includes finding objects, photography, computer manipulation, transferring images and painting. The images thus develop through varied aesthetic and technical processes.

I begin a work by walking around and looking for small objects. I collect flowers for their color, and roots, sticks, and vines for their texture, light, and shadow. I also collect small man-made debris, such as metal and colorful plastic, considering qualities such as reflectivity and transparency. Later, I arrange compositions of the found objects and photograph them in natural light. Typically, I use a conventional single lens reflex camera with a close-up bellows

attachment but sometimes I use a digital camera. Additionally, I photograph industrial landscapes.

I want the images to create visual impact on a large scale. After enlarging the digital images, details become pixilated and less distinct, but color relationships are able to survive. Thus color has become of central importance in choosing my objects and composing the photographs.

The work is influenced by the time of year in which I begin. The objects available vary according to the season. For example, there are different wildflowers growing at different times of year. Also, the sunlight under which the objects are photographed changes a great deal. There is a strong difference between the warm afternoon light of autumn and the cool muted light of a winter day. Photographs taken in strong light tend to have a crisp quality while those taken in dimmer light are blurrier.

After scanning photographs into Photoshop, I manipulate color, collage images, create computer-generated marks, and enlarge the images. In most of the images I collage close-up photographs. However, in some pieces, I include elements of industrial landscape.

The computer offers a flexible and forgiving method, allowing quick decisions that can change the entire composition rapidly. I try different photos and make numerous compositions before settling on the one to print.

Once the composition is completed, the image is printed on a color laser printer. I select eight by ten inch sections of the image and print them on letter-

sized paper. An entire image may have 100-200 pages. Slightly overlapping the rectangular selections helps in later assembling.

After printing, I assemble the pieces in the studio. I rubber cement the myriad of rectangles together to form the large-scale image. It is important that the seams are sealed tightly for the next step. I cover the image with five or six coats of matte gel medium, allowing four to five hours for each coat to dry.

Once dry, the gel medium fuses to the laser toner making it possible to remove the paper. I wash the paper off using a stiff cleaning brush, a towel, ammonia and water. There will still be a residual amount of paper stuck to the medium; it is impossible to get it all off. I have discovered that Polycrylic (an acrylic imitation of polyurethane) will soak into the remaining paper fibers making them virtually transparent.

The result of this process is an image embedded in a surface that is transparent, flexible, and skin-like. The image has become detached from its support and is now in a radical and unstable relationship with the world. The macro photography lends mysterious blurs and soft gradients of value. Enlarging and transferring the image amplifies the blurry and muted qualities. Objects are not easily legible as objects and inhabit a mysterious space that seems to recede from the picture plane. The image has a very subtle quality. This state of the process is the point of departure for painting.

Display

Rather than stretching the work on a conventional support, I hang it using a long piece of wood on the top and grommets on the bottom and sides. I hang

the work about an inch away from the wall. This allows shadows from the image to show through the more transparent areas, emphasizing transparency and space.

This hanging solution calls attention to the material and creates an aspect of three-dimensionality. It also emphasizes the relationship between the image and its material. The close-up photos and thin acrylic skin both have a transitory and ephemeral quality to them. Without a paper or canvas substrate, the image itself is the painting support. I hope that the way in which I hang the work provokes the viewer to question exactly where the picture plane resides in the pieces.

Paint

I work in acrylic paint—a very different material than laser toner of the digital print. Acrylic paint is strong in color. Marks have hard edges and are difficult to blend. This paint is challenging because of its permanence; I have seconds to wipe an area away before it is there for good. However, acrylic offers a number of benefits. Rapid drying is important because I often flip the piece over to work on the reverse side and need the front to be dry. I occasionally adhere transferred images to the works during the painting stage. Using oil paint would preclude this option.

Marks in acrylic paint tend to have the opposite qualities of the transferred digital print. One major problem is how to integrate two very different media. How can I enhance the digital image with acrylic paint?

I use a variety of approaches and techniques in the painting process. Often, I begin by glazing thin coats of color, subtly altering the digital color. I also paint on the back of the works, allowing the paint color to mix with the laser toner and integrate into the front surface of the work. In some areas, I use thick-bodied paint with gestural approaches, which risks overpowering the digital print but offers energy and contrast. Preserving the digital image as a central element of the piece creates challenges not associated with painting on blank canvas.

The searching process of painting forms an important content element of the work. The finished works are not preconceived, but are the result of building up marks and relationships, a process I find analogous to dreaming. Marks cannot be interpreted until they are painted just as dream images cannot be interpreted until they are dreamt. The painted image forms meaning in the context of the accumulation of marks. The meaning is fleeting and difficult to grasp. Willem de Kooning remarked of his paintings that “content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash” (198). I want my paintings to be encounters where meaning occasionally pierces the surface of consciousness.

The Roles of Paint and the Digital Image

When juxtaposing two contrasting media, the roles that the two play become pertinent intellectual investigations. The two are integral and symbiotic, and an important aspect of the work is the dialogue between these two differing media.

I find the transferred digital image to have a beauty, subtlety, and unity. It is easy to destroy or render illegible some of the passages of this image with

paint. However, it is not the unity achieved in the digital print that I am striving for. Instead, I seek a *strange kind of resolution* to the dualisms, dichotomies, and contradictions that become manifest once the paint hits the surface.

I am also very attracted to the space that the paint creates. Shadows are cast by painted marks and are visible through the translucent surface. These shadows emphasize the literal space behind the painting. Formally, the paint creates space as well. The contrast of the intense color and materiality of the paint with the muted and blurred quality of the transfer makes the digital image appear to recede.

The digital image affords the paint autonomy. In a sense, it is analogous to the role that photography played in the advent of modernism. Though there were claims that photography would cause the death of painting, instead it allowed for the exploration into the intrinsic nature of paint. "Painting's ability to survive such attacks and indeed to persist despite them.... seems to me a function of its redundancy, of all that its abolition by photography left it to do" (Gilbert-Rolfe, 159). The digital image provides a support as well as a starting point for painting.

Chaos and Resolution

The work contains a number of dualisms, oppositions, and dichotomies. There is an opposition between chaos and unity. Paint provides energy, excitement, and intense color but also has a tendency to fracture the unity of the digital image. I want the image to possess both unity and controlled chaos. To achieve this, during painting, I try to exercise a balance between calculation and

spontaneity. When I begin painting, I often respond in a spontaneous manner. As I discover more marks and relationships to respond to, I find that calculation is possible. It becomes easier to predict what the image needs.

As I progressed through the paintings in the project, calculation and intentionality increasingly balanced spontaneity and chaos. Thus, the digital component plays a more important role in the later works than the earlier ones.

Conclusion

Process, material, and content are inextricably linked in this work. Integrating photography, computer manipulation, fabrication of the transfer, and painting proved a complex but rewarding process. I hope that my choices of display and emphases of the material underscore a unique synthesis of the hand and technology. It is my intent that the combination of the subtle and mysterious qualities of the transferred computer photo-collages and the more immediate and physical nature of the painted passages exudes a sublime quality that points to experiences larger than conscious reality.

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Images



Snapdragon, 2004, acrylic on transferred digital print, 76"x86"



Snapdragon (detail)



Surface Tension, 2004, acrylic on transferred digital print, 116"x136"



Freedom and Restraint, 2004, acrylic on transferred digital print, 70"x91.5"



Unfamiliar Territory, 2004, acrylic on transferred digital print, 91"x55"

Vita

Benjamin Dillon was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1971. He grew up in Higganum, Connecticut, and Skaneateles, New York. He is the son of Michael and Meredith Dillon. He studied social thought at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1993. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in studio art from the University of Wyoming in Laramie, Wyoming, in 2001. Benjamin will receive his Master of Fine Arts degree with a concentration in painting from Louisiana State University in August, 2004.