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Screen Space

SCREEN SPACE

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Magda Cebokli | Peter Daverington
Warren Hine | Zac Koukoravas

Curated by Simone Hine

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Current visual culture is predominately produced and circulated through digital forms, as such, digital artefacts are ubiquitous components of the material form of contemporary images. This exhibition presents the work of four artists who knowingly incorporate a digital aesthetic into the tradition of painting. Digital images are so commonplace that it is only once we see certain digital artefacts rendered in paint that they begin to show themselves as an aesthetic choice.

Warren Hine painted *White Light* in 1996, at a time when the terrain of visual culture was in transition from predominantly analogue to digital modes of production. Photoshop was in its infancy and artists were discovering the possibilities that this new medium held for visual culture.

The debates at this time were focused upon the changing status of the photograph as mechanical evidence of a moment in time. With the ability to seamlessly manipulate images came a questioning of the fidelity of the image. Hine's work bypassed these debates and instead focused on the possibilities of a new way to paint refracted light. Despite the incorporation of new technologies, the work remained embedded within a painterly sensibility.

In a gesture reminiscent of the impressionist agenda, at another time of significant technological change, Hine applied Photoshop filters to photographs he took of the Brisbane landscape. These images were then transcribed into paint. The extreme incline of the hills in the inner-north of Brisbane creates a particular effect, as the weatherboard houses appear to sit on top of each other, occupying a single plane. The sense of depth is skewed by an ability to see multiple houses rising vertically, as opposed to the horizontal expanses typical of suburban terrain. The particularity of this landscape creates a flattening of the image that is further facilitated by its abstraction into blocks of colour through the use of Photoshop.

At the time of the production of *White Light*, Photoshop was already gathering prominence as the leading industry tool for the manipulation of photographic images. However, it is only with hindsight that the extent to which the lens of Photoshop would infiltrate photography has become apparent. It is perhaps this prophetic use of Photoshop that embeds the painting within the time of its production, while at the same time maintaining its relevance some twenty years later.

Magda Cebokli's *Probability* (2010) series utilises computer technology to systemise colour selections in a way that removes the artist's intent from the construction of the image, leaving the composition of the painting to chance. Cebokli uses a computer algorithm to randomly select numbers which correspond to specific colours on the spectrum from black to white. On a gridded canvas, she systematically, and meticulously, paints this randomly selected series of colours onto the grid. The colours are arranged from dark to light, and back again, along the horizontal axis and according to percentages of probability on the vertical axis. The effect produced in *Probability Monochrome #4,* is the appearance of a black and white arc composed of visible pixels.

Despite each unit of colour having a visual reference to digital pixels, the process Cebokli uses is firmly cemented within Modern art history. The grid formation defined endless practices throughout Modernity. Rosalind Krauss, in her seminal text "Grids" (1979), identifies a conundrum between the grid's inability to map anything other than the material plane of the canvas, and the rhetoric that so often accompanied its use, which endowed it with a spiritual presence by suggesting that it held the possibility of a universal language, with Piet Mondrian's use of the grid being an example par excellence. I have evoked this argument in order to

suggest that Cebokli engages with this history of the grid in the *Probability* series, and indeed many of her other paintings, in a way that complicates the possibility of a spiritual reading of the work, because she removes the artist's intent from the formation of the design. The resulting work is a formal extrapolation of a concept, derived from a series of numbers and then executed on a single painted plane, bringing the work much more in line with Krauss's initial idea that the grid can mark nothing more than a material surface.

While Cebokli's work is firmly cemented within a history of geometric abstraction, it stands as a testament to the ever pervasive presence of digital aesthetics in both our reading of the work in particular and the world in general. I find it difficult to think of Cebokli's works, which clearly presents the viewer with a painted modernist grid, in these painterly terms, instead I return to the idea that these paintings are the replication of a series of pixels. The smaller works further complicate this reading because of their visual likeness to Quick Response (QR) Codes. Cebokli's practice draws into question whether it remains possible to look at the Modernist grid, as a key component of the history of painting, without finding references to digital pixels as a symbol of the technological developments that have changed our relationship with the image since Modernity.

Likewise, Zac Koukoravas paints images that could be read as a continuation of a history of experiments with geometric abstraction. However, instead of reducing the picture plane to a single painted surface, Koukoravas presents a series of geometric shapes and lines that are layered over each other on transparent surfaces, spatially expanding the picture plane and creating new relationships between the figure and ground.

Like Cebokli, Koukoravas presents the viewer with more complicated versions of these formalist experiments by evoking three-dimensional image-making software programs. Koukoravas's paintings are reminiscent of screenshots taken from the AutoCAD program. The black backgrounds support floating objects, whose forms are given volume through the use of gradients. This aesthetic seems particularly reminiscent of these kinds of three-dimensional image-making programs. Koukoravas's most recent works include a series of lines which outline a form similar to that of the floating objects. Once again, these lines are reminiscent of the meshes used to construct forms in AutoCAD. If we are to take this program as our reference point, *Consolation* (2014) can be seen to depict an ambiguous floating form that appears as a folded piece of paper, like a piece of origami that is only half-formed: a reference back to paper, as a material ground of both painting and photography.

Peter Daverington's series of paintings *From the Future with Love* (2012) present idyllic natural landscapes, whose soft focus creates a dreamlike state that is reminiscent of fantasy art. These landscapes are rendered with a clarity and detail that allows the viewer to be drawn into to the seductive world presented. This evocation of an otherworldly place is harshly disrupted by a second illusion that occupies the same diegetic space, which shows the mimetic image being shattered across the canvas like shards of glass. This effect is itself rendered in paint, creating two mimetic planes within the painting. The first being the painterly landscape and the second being the effect of the painting at once exploding and disintegrating into planes of colour.

Daverington uses computer software to create this juxtaposition between the construction of space in traditional modes of mimetic painting and that created in three dimensional digital space. The two dimensional mimetic image is shown in these works as a façade, whose formal components of paint and canvas are laid bare before the viewer as the representation of digital space. This is further complicated because the blocks of colour function simultaneously as objects in space and as planes of colour. While these planes create the effect of objects rendered

in a three-dimensional digital space, they also reference the history of colour field painting and geometric abstraction, showing the painting as returning to its basic components.

Daverington's approach to representing landscape can be seen in contrast to the approach taken by Hine, and each approach is indicative of the time when the work was made. Daverington's paintings appear as the product of a time when our lives are saturated with an endless procession of images via the internet and mobile devices. Like shards of glass, these images break and dissipate the illusion. Hine's landscape, on the other hand, was produced on the cusp of these technologies becoming accessible tools for artists to use in the production of work. As such, *White Light* appears as a formal experiment concerned with the possibilities presented by new technologies. Twenty years later, Daverington's paintings appear more sceptical of digital visual culture, but the vibrant colour scheme and smooth edges of the fractured images hint toward a light-hearted approach to this scepticism, which offers a similar sense of enthusiasm for the digital culture it incorporates.

Each of the works in this exhibition evoke a digital aesthetic and meticulously render it in paint. This formal gesture creates a conceptual tension across each of the different works, between the cold precision of the digital, with its emphasis on exact and endless replications, and the hand of the artist, which is necessarily variable and unpredictable. Each artist seems to fight against the digital, finding recourse in the human gesture of the application of paint.

Simone Hine