5-19-2016

Reaching Quiet

Michael Strobert
mpsfaa@rit.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School of Art
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Fine Arts Studio

Reaching Quiet

by

Michael Strobert

Date:
5/19/2016
Thesis Approval

Thesis Title: Reaching Quiet

Thesis Author: Michael Strobert

Chief Advisor  Elizabeth Kronfield

_______________________________
(Signature)
Date: ______________________

Associate Advisor  Eileen Feeney Bushnell

_______________________________
(Signature)
Date: ______________________

Associate Advisor  Denton Crawford

_______________________________
(Signature)
Date: ______________________

Chair, School of Art  Glen Hintz

_______________________________
(Signature)
Date: ______________________
Abstract

This thesis serves as the documentation into an investigation of an intersection of elements – the digital and mechanical and the organic and natural – that create our surroundings and inform our perspectives. Informed by the complex fluidity of the organic, juxtaposed with the precision and detail of the digital and mechanical, I have worked to create systems that expose the intangible through multiple forms. Through these new analogues, I explore the convergence of time, space, perception, and reality. I approach these concepts by focusing on the projection and exploration of hope, possibility, and potential.
# Table of Contents

Thesis Approval 2  
Abstract 4  
Table of Contents 5  
List of Illustrations 6  
Convergence 7  
Definitions 8  
Background; context and insights 8  
Defining a method 10  
Landscape forms, ideas of space 11  
Abstraction, digital aesthetic 12  
Drawing, conceptual analogues 12  
Beginning a process 14  
Series 1, Not Unlike Now 15  
Series 2, Reaching Quiet 16  
Series 3, A Specific Moment of Clarity 17  
Conclusion 18  
Bibliography 19  
Figure 1 20  
Figure 2 21  
Figure 3 22  
Figure 4 23  
Figure 5 24  
Figure 6 25  
Figure 7 26  
Figure 8 27  
Figure 10 29  
Figure 11 30  
Figure 12 31  
Figure 13 32  
Figure 14 33
List of Illustrations

Research

Evolution

1. *Erosion Study*, 4-Color Intaglio Print, 2014,
2. *Untitled*, Intaglio Print, 2014,

Thesis

Series 1


Series 2


Series 3

11. *A Specific Moment of Clarity – August or September, I*, Lambda Print, 2015
12. *A Specific Moment of Clarity – August or September, II*, Lambda Print, 2015
13. *A Specific Moment of Clarity – August or September, III*, Lambda Print, 2015
14. *A Specific Moment of Clarity – August or September, IV*, Lambda Print, 2015
**Convergence**

Concepts of time, including the passage of time and visions of future, have led me to work with visual representations of form through generation, evolution, and erosion. This body of work is an investigation into the intersections of the tangible and intangible along with the organic and mechanical – the elements that form our (human) realities, our time and space. Through the creation of “moments”, the work represents an exploration into the notions of self, society, and the effect of technology as they shape our realities and inform our perspectives.

Through this work, a primary motivation was the desire to communicate the experience of a single moment in which all awareness is present and there is an alignment of self and sensation with all aspects of one’s physical and mental environment. The goal of this work is to engage the viewer in an environment that affords them the opportunity to recognize their immediate space and time – their mental, physical, and spatial awareness converge in “a moment”.

Much of the inspiration for my work has evolved from my personal sensitivities to time, the perspective of the essential (essentials in life in contrast to the superficial or “false” priority), the tangible (that which can be touched and effected), and the intangible (the digital spaces, perceptions, and personas). My background in interactive design and passion for tangible materials has led me to explore the use of digitally created elements combined with physical forms as a means of realizing the convergence of the digital and intangible, and the natural. Through this, I worked to explore the richness of the new aesthetic of these intersections.
Definitions
To set additional context, my personal definitions of several elements are key to understanding my process and goals of the work.

Space – I define space as not just a physical environment and the corresponding attributes, but also a mental environment with unique attributes associated to the quality of mind. Space can be meditative and found through thought, the in-between of thought, in memory, or, perhaps most importantly, through the lack of thought.

Quiet – A desired state of mind and intention that exists within the chaos of our lives. A personal goal.

Generative – The computer generated aspect of the image that relies on the partial autonomy of the software, in this case, written in Processing, that uses algorithms to determine or extend qualities and features of the artwork created. The generative drawings that I created required human interaction, through various inputs, to initiate and define the overall form.

Background; context and insights
Prior to the examination of this body of work, my professional background and preceding education were in interaction and user experience design. For the past fifteen years, much of my work has been in the field of new and emerging medias and has been created digitally for screen-based display and interaction. The focus of my professional work has been primarily on application and software design. I have done work ranging from highly engaging and experimental to pragmatic and task-focused. At the core of it all, is the understanding of how
natural and physical elements in a user’s life affect how they perceive, react to, and engage with
digital elements and equivalents. Through this work, and in part due to the rapid growth and
adoption of digital devices (both personally and culturally), I have developed a concern for the
overlap of our digital lives with our physical lives and our evolving perception of reality.

Through my professional practice, I have developed a passion for the digital creation
environment and the wide range of toolsets available. Working digitally affords me many
positives, most notably having the ability to iterate quickly on ideas and being able to work
through and evaluate a wide range of possibilities.

My personal life right now is very much about time and the places and spaces that I am in. As
people, we can identify with many different personas, roles, or identities. This work immediately
followed the birth of the latest of my three children and a career change into academics. In many
ways, the landscape of my life had changed dramatically — from what had become established
and familiar to uncertain and open to possibility, all within a relatively short timeframe.
Similarly, without the definitions of design work, my approach to making and the creation of
new work was very much undefined. In an attempt to achieve focus, I had begun to think about
the segmentation of my life through the identification of numerous roles: father, husband,
teacher, student, business owner, et cetera. In all of these roles, common points of concern arose
and I was able to identify time, focus, effort, and priority as significant challenges. In nearly all
aspects of my life, the pace had begun to create the illusion that time was going by faster with far
less awareness than I desired, resulting in the sense of a loss of clarity and intention. Regaining
clarity and intention became a significant motivator in my approach and philosophy to living my
life and as such, became instrumental in my approach to how and why I created work. Through my work, the recognition and connection of the different components of my life, as an identity defined by a space or a time, is something that I wanted to begin to represent in an abstract way.

The direction of my work stems from my personal philosophies – reverence and appreciation for nature, self-reflection, and purposefulness – as well as from my studies and practice in yoga, meditation, and eastern philosophies. There are spiritual aspects to my work that explore the notion of presence and awareness of the self, of space, and of aspects beyond. These can be summed up as the practice of mindfulness and presence; the recognition of one’s self in space through the quality of mind in a moment.

**Defining a method**
What led me to the idea of exploring the spaces was an effort to try and figure out my own spaces – specifically, the space that I came to create in. Here “space” is a blanket term I am using to define my life, mental state, and more specifically, my domain of creation. When I first started doing interface design, much of the work was skeuomorphic and represented the things that existed in our physical lives. In thinking about this, I considered in many ways the inverse of that relationship to be true as well. In much of my current life, areas are influenced by or represented by things that exist digitally or intangibly. I wanted to take that way of thinking and create a different exploration that was not rooted in a function or a pragmatic concern as much of my design work had been.
Landscape forms, ideas of space
(Figures 1 - 2)

Originally and intuitively, due to my passion for the natural, my work evolved from photographs of landscapes and was informed by the scenes of my immediate surroundings. This work focused on repetition, erosion and the attempt to capture and illustrate time through a single instance, a photograph. The recognition of a moment as a singular aspect of a continuum, through the presence of mind and awareness of space, is something that I have been personally working toward in my life through yoga and meditation practices.

The start of the exploration began with prints and imagery created from landscape photography. Thematically, the work was crafted around the ideas of evolution and time. What began as an abstract exploration led to the creation of “spaces” through the manipulation of source imagery. These early explorations led me to the use of reference that included photographic color from gradients of the sky at different times of day, natural erosion patterns from wind, water, and other elements, as well as the use of repetition of line in the composition.

As a response to critique of this early work, I began to move away from landscape photography – I did not want the work to be about “a landscape” or natural landscapes as it began to detract from the core concept of converging spaces. Further, I did not want the work to have the language of photography or the photorealistic aspects of the natural elements in a landscape. Much of the work also had a look of architecture and architectural photography. Similarly, I did not want the work to be about or tied to an actual building or a recognizable physical form. In order for the work to become an abstraction of a landscape or an abstraction of architecture, I
began to create my own language for representing and recreating points of recognizable space. Essentially, it was the process of abstraction and reduction that led me to the use of line and color. Working digitally with generative imagery allowed me the possibility and flexibility to explore new ways of representation.

**Abstraction, digital aesthetic**

(Figure 3)

An additional extension of my exploration of the photographic reference used digital imagery and animations as a source. Much of my background in image making exists in the digital realm and I became interested in understanding the implications of thinking about my work and world in terms of pixels, resolution, and the attributes and language of the digital. To create an overtly digital aesthetic, I worked to strip as much of the artifacts of the hand and of the hand-done processes out of the work. The convergence of digital in a natural world became a driver for really trying to grasp how my work is affected by underlying digital tones as well as how I could use or leverage a digital aesthetic to create new forms.

**Drawing, conceptual analogues**

(Figure 4)

I stumbled across the use of a digital drawing tool rather clumsily through the creation of an interactive piece that I made for Imagine RIT in 2015, the *Imagine-A-Sketch*. The idea started as a large format Etch-A-Sketch for kids and evolved into a dynamic generative digital drawing piece. While the output drawings were wild with color, at the root of the generative drawing was
line-based art. Removed from the exhibit form, I started to use the code from the *Imagine-A-Sketch* as a tool to rapidly create complex line drawings as source for my own work. Like many other artists, the idea of a drawing or a sketch represents the first path to the exploration of a new form. This quickly became my primary method for image making and the basis for all of the thesis work.

By design, the drawing software has an animated quality to it that is not based on time, but rather input or movement by the user (me). The process of doing the drawings became very similar to the process of making a photograph in that it required me to identify, capture, and frame the appropriate moment within the sequence of time and movement. Aesthetics and composition were key decisions in the process of identifying the “right” moment. Experiencing the sequence as it was developing, as well as going too far, resulted in numerous iterations in each series. In the early stages of developing this process, the line work on its own became really interesting. It came to represent the aspects and systems of nature that I was drawn to and still retained the attributes of a digital aesthetic. I began to work many of the compositions out digitally where they existed solely on screen.

The digital component and digital language behind the work was present through the use of the drawing programs that I was creating and exploring – the digital, code-based automation of the imagery extended my inputs to create qualities in the forms that would not be possible to achieve by hand. The various physical inputs (concrete dials, mouse, and trackpad) created a quality of movement and time that, presented through line forms, was purely organic and created by a human.
The interactive drawing tools, generative and programmatic imagery became my way of beginning to create imagery based on the original exploration of landscapes and spatial references through a mechanical means. The creations became analogues of physical and environmental spaces. Through continued use, I begin considering how, through input, my emotions and mental spaces presented themselves as organic and natural in the work.

The process of identifying the right qualities of a “moment” of a much larger drawing space or plane, as well as identifying the right time within the overall timeline of the piece, became critical to the final forms. It became extremely important to the work to have the authority to make those decisions rather than to leave them to chance, create them arbitrarily, or determine them through automation in the software. In that way, the work became inextricably tied to me.

**Beginning a process**

While much of my work (upon reflection) has a continuity to it, in the spring of 2015 the untimely passing of Mr. Keith Howard, my printmaking teacher and primary mentor, was a defining moment in the development of my work. With Keith, I had been working to achieve a more direct method of image transfer to the photopolymer film that we were using to create the intaglio plates in the non-toxic printmaking studio at R.I.T. The purpose for this pursuit was twofold: to recreate imagery with greater clarity and to reduce the number of reproductions an image must go through before being printed (thereby hopefully removing points of error or imperfection). Following a string of failures in the testing and the passing of Keith, there was
little motivation to continue the work that I had been pursuing under his guidance. Conceptually however, the idea of reduction in process and removing my (the artist’s) hand from areas of the work, was most intriguing and an aspect that I continued to pursue. Over several months, I ran numerous tests using a laser cutter to engrave plates to identify and establish a new process. The result was the following series of prints that established an aesthetic that was both directly digital and mechanical through the plate making process and organic and natural through the inking and printing process. This convergence became the basis for the body of my thesis work.

Series 1, Not Unlike Now
(Figures 5 - 8)

_Not Unlike Now_ refers to reflection and recognition of likeness or familiarity. The space that I was in during the creation of this work was about exploration and an attempt to tie together my previous work in landscape forms to new ways of creating drawings.

In this series, process became very important. I began using a version of the software from the _Imagine-A-Sketch_ to create precise line drawings on massive digital canvases. The process of working digitally allowed me to create a volume of source drawings that would have otherwise been nearly impossible using traditional methods. As both the author of the tool and a user of the tool, I was able to insert authorship over the work at multiple levels while still remaining dependent upon the digital and mechanical means of image (line) generation and plate production.
Prior to printing these works, I had been thinking about them purely in black and white. Through the process, tone became very apparent as an organic element that was exposed in the output. Once I started inking the plates up, I noticed that there was something there that I had not seen on screen and had not considered to be essential in the work. The gradation, the errors, the “mark of the hand” became important. It was in these marks that I began to recognize “space” and the natural senses that one has when identifying a space. Through this series, I realized that reinserting me, my “hand” and authorship, back into the process of making the work was the most essential natural element that I wanted to communicate.

**Series 2, Reaching Quiet**
(Figures 9 - 10)

This series was created a few months after we had our third child. With six-year old twins, two dogs, a full-time teaching commitment, my life had evolved into a chaos of time management and constant distraction from the work. At that time, I needed my studio practice to be a place where, through the work, I was could create distance from the noise and clarity in my intentions. The title of this series is a reference to this act and to the process of striving towards an ideal.

In this series, I approached the use of color, or rather the integration of color, very pragmatically based on the original intention of what I wanted the work to be about. The tonal quality of the ink wiping marks in the previous series became something that I wanted to explore in a digital output. Applied gradients and colors poorly mimicked the hand printed work and lacked the natural attributes and organic qualities (the natural senses that one has when identifying a space)
that were being referenced. Recognizing this, I identified that the use of color, or any tonal shift, had to be done or created as naturally as possible.

A number of years ago, I started the practice of taking pictures of sky gradients at different times of day. I was mostly interested in capturing the quality of light and comparing the tones from different locations and times of day. In most of my design work I create color palettes from image reference, so somewhat intuitively, I began to work with color and tone in a similar manner. By directly using the gradations from the photographs rather than recreating the color digitally, I explored how color effected the line and how the two components began to work together. This process circled back to my original source reference of nature and landscape photography and gave me a mechanism to apply an additional layer of information to reference time and space.

**Series 3, A Specific Moment of Clarity**
(Figures 11 - 14)

*A Specific Moment of Clarity* refers to the idea of moments of significance in life – moments that stand out from all others in the continuum. These moments often make up memories, are the foundation for major decisions, or can be identified as crucial or profound. As the final pieces of work created for my thesis, this series represents the clarity of the trajectory of an (the) idea – the moment at which I knew where I was going and why. No longer questioning or in the process of investigation, these pieces address specifics of time and space more directly than the previous works.
Conclusion

Through the development of the processes used in the creation of this body of work, I have been able to begin to explore both the significance and effect of organic and mechanical relationships in making artwork. These relationships are linked directly to the human component and the computer generated component of the work and to the roles at which each establish and the authorship that each relinquish. The development and maturity of the concepts and of the work have exposed the push-pull dynamics of this coexistence.

In many ways, I have only begun to scratch the surface of this inquiry and the work in this thesis represents only my first attempts at understanding and expressing these concepts. The overall cohesiveness of the thesis body of work and the progression of the research work leading to it, has created a successful foundation with which to continue this exploration.
Bibliography


Figure 1

*Erosion Study*, 4-Color Intaglio Print, 2014
Figure 2

*Untitled*, Intaglio Print, 2014
Figure 3

Movement Series, Intaglio, 2015
Imagine-A-Sketch, Interactive, 2015
Figure 5

*Not Unlike Now, I*, Intaglio Print, 2015
Figure 6

*Not Unlike Now, II*, Intaglio Print, 2015
Figure 7

*Not Unlike Now, III*, Intaglio Print, 2015
Figure 8

*Not Unlike Now, IV*, Intaglio Print, 2015
Figure 9

*Reaching Quiet, Field A*, Lambda Print, 2015
Figure 10

*Reaching Quiet, Field B*, Lambda Print, 2015
Figure 11

*A Specific Moment of Clarity – August or September, I*, Lambda Print, 2015
Figure 12

*A Specific Moment of Clarity – August or September, II, Lambda Print, 2015*
Figure 13

*A Specific Moment of Clarity – August or September, III*, Lambda Print, 2015
Figure 14

*Figure 14: A Specific Moment of Clarity – August or September, IV, Lambda Print, 2015*