Abstract

Painting Process as Art Form

Paint and Pixels Accelerate and Enhance Visual Problem Solving
– Integration Creates a New Art Form

by

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The purpose of this written report of my thesis is to discuss the research and visual element presented in partial fulfillment of the Master of Fine Arts degree. In my research and creative practice, I focus on the integration of traditional and digital methods of painting – and explore the broad range of new creative opportunities this provides.

Currently, image software allows for surprising similarities in replicating the appearance of traditional painting and drawing material. My exploration is focused on using wet-into-wet alla prima oil painting methods within the software application Photoshop 12. The created digital paintings are printed on canvas as either final works, or as a basis for ongoing development with traditional materials and/or with kinematic digital projection superimposed. Incorporating the results of this research has enhanced my studio and teaching practice and opens windows to new art forms.
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Paint and Pixels Accelerate and enhance Visual Problem Solving – Integration Creates a New Art Form

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INTRODUCTION

What if Rembrandt had access to a computer, would he have used it? Would old masters have used Photoshop for teaching composition, color theory, and visual problem solving? Is Donald Kuspit correct with his assertion that if Leonardo were alive today “he would be a cutting edge digital artist and computer scientist”? (Kuspit) Since materials were often rare and hard to come by, would old masters have used a more economical method of working through ideas? Throughout history artists have used the latest materials and inventions to advance their practice and research. Laptops and portable devices are now our primary means of communication, recording ideas, and even viewing art. How do these relatively new media affect the idea of art creation and education?

A disconnect currently exists between new media practitioners and artists using traditional methods. My research seeks to identify and assemble a very simple set of tools that can be used to arm the traditional artist with the capability of using digital media in research and practice with a traditional mindset. These tools and methods expedite more efficient thinking and problem solving in painterly practice. Additional benefits of this method are that fewer rare and hazardous materials are used in the painter’s studio exploration and learning as well as saving paper, canvas, and other material costs.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

My research question is could it be possible to integrate a traditional style of wet-into-wet oil painting method digitally into studio practice and what impact would it have?
RESEARCHING DIGITAL PAINTING POSSIBILITIES

ALLA-PRA MA OR ‘WET-INTO-WET’ REPRESENTATIONAL PAINTING

For ‘wet-into-wet’ or ‘alla-prima’ style representational painting, the artist must see and understand the distinct points of light, shadow, and reflected light on objects and use this knowledge to create the illusion of 3D form on a 2D surface. It is also necessary, with traditional materials, to move quickly and develop the forms while the paint is still wet. The steps of wet-into-wet representational painting are to 1) paint in the primary shadow values; 2) paint in the core color of the form; 3) connect or slightly blend with the brush at the area where the light will fade into shadow; 4) establish highlights and connect them into the core form; 5) carve out the background by painting opaque paint around the form; and finally 6) establish the illusion of atmospheric light by connecting the edge of the form into the background.

Operationally it is important to know what the results will be with alla-prima style painting before the brush even touches the canvas. The mind has to be fully attentive; especially at the moment the brush makes a connection between any two passages of paint. Ideally, there is a natural rhythm that begins to happen, a ‘flow’, once the hand and mind are moving in synchronicity with what the eye perceives. This flow of thinking and painting that comes from a wet-into-wet approach was not possible in Photoshop before the introduction of the mixer brush in Photoshop 12.
Investigating Photoshop as a Painting Tool

Since 1999, the software company Adobe has held U.S. patent #6870550 for ‘digital painting’. My first exposure to their digital editing and painting software Photoshop was in 1993 with version 2, and I have been using it for 20 years in different venues ever since. As the Art Director at Red Storm Entertainment located in Raleigh, NC, a division of Ubisoft studios, I used Photoshop to create the graphic elements for user-interface designs, concept art, and textures for character models and environments for video games. When I worked as a photo-retoucher at the advertising agency McKinney located in Durham, NC, I used Photoshop to edit automobile photos for print and online ads. Both of these roles require different approaches to working with Photoshop in order to capitalize on the various features in the software.

In past attempts at using Photoshop as a painting tool, I had always found it counter intuitive to alla-prima style oil painting. To be fair, over the past twenty years a large following of illustrators and concept artists have developed techniques for producing digital paintings or illustrations within Photoshop – often with incredible results. These artists typically work in multiple layers of color and opacity to develop form, which is a similar technique to glazing thin layers of oil on canvas or board. However, the problem is that digital painting in a wet-into-wet style in Photoshop has been impossible since the workflow did not support connecting pixels together in the same manner as connecting two or more colors of oil paint. When Adobe introduced the “mixer brush mode” in version 12 of Photoshop, the tool allowed for the mixing of color on the computer monitor screen or projector – just like mixing oil colors on canvas. This unlocked Photoshop’s ability to imitate the development of traditional style wet-into-wet paintings.
The first step in painting digitally is to have the proper tool or ‘input device’ as it is termed technically. The primary input device for painting on the computer is a digitizing or graphic tablet and an accompanying stylus pen (see fig. 1). The current industry leader in design and development of these devices is the Japanese company Wacom (pronounced waːkəm). The Wacom tablet allows for pressure of the stylus pen on the surface of the tablet to be translated into the marks that are made on the computer screen. The advance in this technology allows for a broad range of sensitivity in mark making and can closely match a physical paintbrush stroke in side-by-side comparisons (see fig. 2).

Figure 1. Wacom Intuos 4 tablet and stylus pen
The key to applying a wet-into-wet approach within Photoshop comes from combining the mixer brush and a pressure sensitive tablet which allows for control of the mixing or blending of 100% solid or opaque pixels. With oil paints, controlling the amount of mixing with a brush is accomplished by using mixtures of mediums composed of slippery linseed oil, watery mineral spirits or sticky varnishes. Adobe accomplished this in Photoshop 12 by simulating oil-based mediums when using the mixer brush. These preset algorithms imitate the visual quality of different oil mediums when mixing or blending paint and include: “dry”, “wet”, and “very wet” (see fig. 3).
To complete the experience of wet-into-wet painting, Adobe included a feature to “clean the brush after each stroke” which replicates the studio practice of using a rag to wipe excess paint from the brush (see fig. 4). This is important for placing a clean brush into one color to pull it into another color without getting the colors too muddy. In Photoshop 12, once the “Clean the brush...” function has been is selected, the brush is cleared or effectively cleaned after each stroke – meaning the computer does not retain the memory of the color previously touched. The ability to have the computer clean the brush simply by lifting the stylus pen off the tablet saves significant time and mirrors exactly the studio practice of wiping a brush to control the amount of oil paint in the brush itself (see fig. 5).
The Research Value of My Game Development Experience

In dealing with computer software, there are times when features do not work the way you expect or need them to. When this happens it is very easy to think there must be something wrong with you as the user of the software. After all, a modern computer is a sophisticated and complex piece of engineering. It is hard to imagine there is something wrong with it or the software that is written for it by programmers working on these complex machines. But in over a decade of video game development, I have often seen a programmer write a feature into an application’s code that did not work the way it was intended. In fact, in my experience this has often been the case and may be more the rule than the exception. Even
when the new feature is technically ‘working’, it may not work in harmony with other parts of the software – but the new code would still be considered to be functioning ‘correctly’.

To establish the best way to use a software feature, or to root out problems that arise, it is necessary to test options and variables in different combinations. Some of these combinations will work and some will not. It is very important to remember that even with a twenty-year history, Photoshop is still just computer software – written by human programmers that likely have little or no training in the arts. Features will not always make sense to the artist that is using it, and will often not work as expected.

The mixer brush mode would appear to be exactly what a traditionally trained alla-prima painter would need. The feature set design seems perfect for digitally replicating the process of working with oil paint. But, having the experience of working with programmers, I was not surprised when I discovered that the mixer brush mode was unusable with almost 90% of the default brushes in Photoshop. The processor and graphics card of the computer were unable to perform the complex task of blending the pixels fast enough to yield a fluid painting experience. The computer screen would lag behind my marks, like a movie that skips frames in slow motion. A programmer would say the feature is ‘working’ but that you may need a top of the line system to use it. On most low-end laptop systems with an entry-level graphics card the lagging experience would lead an artist to disregard the mixer brush mode as a useless feature. In fact, when I mentioned the mixer brush to professional artists that work in Photoshop daily to earn a living as Illustrators, they confirm that it is indeed ‘worthless’ and ‘impossibly slow’. My background in game development came into play in addressing this problem.
I worked diligently through the better part of a semester to find a combination of brush complexity and document file size enabling a fluid painting experience on a low-end laptop. My target platform was my own laptop – a mid 2010 Macbook Pro with an Intel Duo Core 2.3 ghz processor and an integrated graphics card. Interestingly enough, Adobe includes brushes in the default menu that an artist would think of using right away: “round point stiff”, “flat fan high bristle count”, “flat blunt short stiff”. These brushes even have a traditional looking paintbrush icon in the interface displayed on screen. But, as it turns out, the design of these brushes is too complex to use in mixer brush mode because the processor and graphics card cannot keep pace with the brush strokes made on the graphics tablet. The most fluid experience involved using a brush that was labeled as “chalk 17”, a very simple brush. With that brush I was able to make marks freely and loosely and then vary the “viscosity” of the brush with excellent results. Combining the “chalk 17” brush with the “spatter 24” brush allowed for efficient connecting of different passages of color like an oil brush on canvas (see fig. 6).
When I began to experiment with different document size dimensions a new problem arose. If the document size exceeded 8 x 11 inches by 300 dpi, a standard printing resolution, then the computer would begin to lag. This problem is analogous to one that I routinely encountered in game development. Just like a film projector displaying 24 frames per second, the graphics processor on a computer (or gaming system) is displaying sequential frames on the screen at 30-120 frames a second to create the illusion of fluid motion in the human brain. The lag problem arises if the amount of data to be rendered or drawn to the screen is too dense and complex for the power of the computer system. The graphics card simply cannot keep up with the demand of the information that it is being asked to process. Gamers hate this experience with a passion – as it pulls them out of the experience of being lost in the video game world, or their suspension of disbelief. The solution to addressing this problem in Photoshop involved reducing the amount of data that was displayed to the screen at any given time. By zooming
into the digital painting at the target area being worked on, the amount of data being processed by the graphics card is significantly reduced. The result is a return to the fluid digital painting experience as the graphics processor can now keep pace with our perception of ‘real time’.

Once all the relationships that affected a fluid digital painting experience were understood and a repeatable sequence of steps established, it was time to begin trial runs. One of the first tests was to paint something simple – an orange (see fig. 7). The process of using two different brushes allowed me to paint digitally from observation in the same manner I paint with oil. This test was completed in less than ten minutes (Peedin, youtube).

![Image of an orange painted digitally](image-url)

Figure 7. Orange Still Life Test

The next experiment was to study the style of a master painter, a common practice in art training. I had recently seen the painting “A Portrait of an Old Man” by Rembrandt at the
North Carolina Museum of Art. During the opening, I stood in front of the painting long enough, and close enough to get the typical response from the museum guards – a stern glare and a slow walk in my direction. The experience of studying Rembrandt’s brushwork gave me a mental image of details to add to the reference image I set out to study.

As soon as I began to digitally copy the portrait, I had the experience of seeing and understanding the structural relationships between the brushstrokes of Rembrandt’s painting technique on a new level. Within thirty minutes, I had mapped out the core of the face and understood more about his use of color and how he abstracted form with brushstrokes to control color value and light to affect atmosphere and mood (see fig. 8). This study would have taken me hours with traditional materials (Peedin, youtube).
At this point, I began to consider that with the speed of digital painting, the lessons of traditional painting and drawing could be used to expedite iteration, skill development, and compress learning time. After the positive results with the initial experiments, I was ready to move onto my next test – painting from a live model.

**Painting Alla-Prima with Pixels From Life**

Painting a live model from observation can be an integral part of any painting education. The process requires the presence of a model, male or female, that can hold a single pose without moving. The painting sessions can take place over single or multiple sittings. The sessions are typically 2-3 hours with short breaks every 20 to 30 minutes. For alla-prima painting from a live model, the goal is to complete or at least paint all of the necessary details in
a single session.

My goal with this test was to use the same digital painting process that I would use with oil. The steps involved: 1) roughly sketch out the figure; 2) paint in broad patches of color to simplify the shapes; and 3) shift to mixer brush mode and connect these passages together. The results were immediately staggering, I was able to work as fast or faster than painting with oil. The example in figure 9 was completed in just under an hour.

![Figure 9. Live Model Digital Painting](image)

Weeks of practice led me to establish a very natural rhythm digitally painting from a live model. I began recording the results of these live model sessions and posting them to YouTube (see fig. 10). The feedback was immediately positive and even resulted in an invitation to teach this technique at the Art Student’s League in New York.
DIGITAL ALLA-PRIMA PROCESS RESEARCH SUMMARY

The investigation of Photoshop 12 as a direct painting tool left me impressed with the capabilities of the software to emulate the feeling of painting with oil. On a qualitative level, there was a level of fearlessness that I found to be different than in painting with traditional media. Typically, fearlessness when painting with oil comes after years of hard work, producing dozens, if not hundreds of poor paintings and investing several thousands of dollars worth of materials in the process. Here the flexibility and speed of experimenting happens so quickly that I found myself fresh and aware throughout the process. I was not worried about a final product – the physical painting. I was more focused on the act of painting and structuring the brush strokes to build the illusion of form. More importantly, the speed of execution matched
the speed of my thinking, while the efficiency of iteration began to expand my vision of what I could create.

“The most important aspect of digital art is that it makes the creative act -- creative functioning or the creative process -- explicit as it has never been before in any kind of art, indeed, in the entire history of art.” –Donald Kuspit (Kuspit)
Integration of a digital process into my painting studio practice began with a collaboration experiment. I invited two colleagues, Michael Smoot and Abigail Heuss, to bring their own work into the studio to exchange and explore ideas for a painting that would become a contemporary take on a couple’s portrait. Michael’s work of diagrammatic images highlights “biogeochemical cycles as a conceptual starting point for exploring issues of land use.” Abigail’s “Spoon Collection Family Tree” is a body of work with individual spoon designs representing certain personality characteristics or habits of her specific family members (see fig. 11).

Figure 11. The work of Michael Smoot (left) and Abigail Heuss (right)

Within minutes of the group discussion, we realized our mutual interest in a common theme – how people connect with each other. Michael’s work was focused on the five
fundamental building blocks of life: carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, sulfur and water while Abigail’s work represented her connection physically and emotionally to her family. An elegant visual solution was to use Michael’s diagrammatic pieces as the branches of Abigail’s family tree. We were all very pleased with the serendipity of this solution. The narrative of connecting the past to the future worked as a perfect metaphor for my research in connecting painting with oil to painting with pixels. The spoons would be placed into the diagrammatic pieces that were overlaid as the framework, or tree, that the spoons lived within. I set up a piece of Plexiglas between two easels to serve as a picture plane where the spoons would hang in space. Images from the photo shoot were used as reference for the painting (see fig. 12). I selected two different poses for Michael and Abigail and began painting with oil directly onto a 60”x 36” canvas (see fig. 13).

Figure 12. Studio photo shoot of discussion (left) and Plexiglass posing.
After establishing a representation of Michael and Abigail on canvas with oil, the next step involved using layers and masks in Photoshop 12 to resolve the composition. This process involved placing elements onto new layers above the base image – similar to using transparency film on an overhead projector. This is accomplished by using a gray scale mask where parts of a layer are made visible or invisible without actually erasing the content on that layer. Working back and forth with this technique, combined with moving and resizing layers, allowed me to quickly see a variety of visual solutions (see fig. 14).
Using layers in Photoshop to problem solve pictorial composition has been available since version 3 was released in 1994. In the past I used Photoshop layers to manipulate photo references or scanned drawings to create complex compositions, but the difference with version 12 is that I had the mixer brush to allow me to paint at the same time (Peedin, youtube).

As I began to paint digitally by adding layers of color and connecting areas with the mixer brush, I was surprised by how quick and efficient it was. Within minutes, I was able to imagine dozens of different possibilities with the painting that would normally take days or weeks to realize with oil (see fig. 15). As the digital painting developed, I began to use it as reference for the oil painting. As opposed to copying a photo onto canvas, I was now copying a painting that I had already worked on digitally, it was still my painting – just in a different form (see fig. 16).
Figure 15. Painting composition rapidly explored digitally. Superimposition presents new possibilities to help solve compositional and painting problems.

Figure 16. Studio oil painting with digital painting as reference

Throughout this process, there would be moments when the oil would allow me to do something different than what would happen on the computer. This was due to the inherent
nature of oil paint’s physical properties and when I preferred the solutions in oil, I would simply photograph the changes, and import them into Photoshop to add into my digital version of the painting. I would then add color layers on top of the new section and move pixels directly with the mixer brush. After a short period of time, a natural back and forth rhythm developed as my mind began to merge the two canvases into a connected idea – a single painting that existed in two different places physically but as a single image inside my mind.

A personal breakthrough happened during this process. The freedom of painting over elements or subject matter digitally began to have the same impact on the physical painting. I found that figurative elements that I had once considered ‘finished’ were now less precious and I gave myself permission to paint over them completely in a confident and relaxed approach that was a direct result of digital painting. While this may not be a hurdle for other artists, it seems significant to mention it here as a personal growth experience resulting from this process (see fig. 17).
Figure 17. Oil painting further developed. Digital exploration frees up the ability to paint more freely with oil painting.

As both the physical and digital paintings developed, inspired by each other, several creative options were revealed. The digital painting can simply be used as a reference for traditional material work. Another option is to allow the oil painting to become the new foundation for a digital painting, which can then be scaled up and printed out on canvas with a large format printer (see fig. 18). This canvas can be stretched and varnished with an acrylic gel coating allowing for continued work in oil or acrylic. I also found that by working only digitally, I produced paintings that I considered complete as final paintings in their own right, as seen in piece entitled War Dreams (see fig. 19), where I expanded upon an earlier figure study from life.
One important and unexpected development with this research was that it opened up a new potential in painting. By working back and forth between the paint and the pixel, one image residing in two locations, I realized that I could connect the two. The next phase would take my painting process into a new realm by painting digitally onto oil – allowing the two worlds to touch.
Figure 19. War Dreams, Printed Pixels and Oil on Canvas, 66”x36”
POVID ART: PIXELS, OIL AND VIDEO

Although I never consciously intended to elevate oil over pixels or vice versa in a hierarchy, I had kept pixels separate from what I considered ‘fine art’ painting. For over two decades, I practiced graphic design, illustration, computer graphics, and animation but kept these disciplines far away from my studio practice. Ironically, in my video game experience, all these skills would be used in finalizing a product: user interface design, graphic design, color theory, scene painting, character design, and animation. All these disciplines were necessary to produce the final ‘gestalt’ experience for the game player – to retain their mind in a sensation of suspended time and disbelief. For me, this research expanded the possibilities to paint into light itself and integrate the two worlds of paint and pixel.

I was led to the work and philosophy of Andrew (Android) Jones, a contemporary artist that has been working digitally for ten years. As Jones said in an interview: “When I make a digital piece, its gallery is inside your head...that transfer of light and energy resides in your imagination...that is what I care about.” (Watchmojo, youtube). I was also inspired William Kentridge’s animated films developed by photographing charcoal drawings at different stages and then assembles them into a continuous video (SFMOMA, youtube).

Ultimately, painting creates an image by controlling the light that the viewer sees. Oil paint is subtractive – absorbing some light waves and reflecting others to the retina of the viewer. Pixels as a painting medium are additive – with the color residing in the light wave itself. Light is the native language of the visual cortex, which creates an image in the viewer’s mind.
This ability to paint digitally in the same manner as oil directly into the light that is seen by the viewer allowed me to explore a new way to create a painting.

I began using the oil-painted canvas as the surface for the projection of the digital painting. The digital component is painted within a full screen document in Photoshop. I recorded these sessions with screen capturing software, Screenflow, and then edited out any of the menu clicks or areas that I did not want in the final video. By using a digital projector, I look directly at the canvas while painting digitally using the Wacom tablet (see fig. 20).

![Digital painting on oil canvas](image.png)

**Figure 20.** Image of digital painting that is projected onto the previously oil painted canvas.

The new pixel-oil-video, or Povid, becomes a new, singular experience integrating the different mediums of paint and pixels – with the process of painting as the method uniting them (see fig. 21).
By optionally adding a low light directed onto the surface of the canvas I reinforce the gallery protocol of lighting the painting as a physical art object. This seems to naturally invite the viewer to move up to the canvas to investigate what is painted on the canvas surface versus what is projected light. The viewer then becomes a participant in the marriage of these two mediums as they cast a shadow onto the surface of the painting while receiving the light of the digital painting onto their bodies (see fig. 22).
Figure 22. Viewer interaction with light while investigating oil painted surface.
Conclusion

The result of my research creates a new space for experimentation by allowing paint and pixels to work together. The foundation of this new art form that emphasizes process is the integration of paint and pixels. The process allows a painter to explore and save any idea or experiment while expediting project development and expanding the painter’s creative process. The process is not bound by linear time and not bound by the fear of failure or loss. One of the most compelling developments for me personally was in having more of an investment into the image that is created, the process of it, and not the physical painting itself.

When looking back at the process of painting over the past two hundred years, perhaps Donald Kuspit is right in his thesis entitled *The Matrix of Sensations*:

“the period of avant-garde painting, which officially began with the so-called color patches of paint in Manet’s *Music in the Tuileries Gardens* in 1862 (see fig. 24), and climaxed almost a century later in the dynamic tachisme of European art informale and American modernist painting, was a time of transition from traditional analogue art to postmodern digital art, that is, to an art grounded in codes rather than images. The status and significance of the image changes in postmodern digital art: the image becomes a secondary manifestation – a material epiphenomen, as it were – of the abstract code, which becomes the primary vehicle of creativity.” (Kuspit)
Kuspit goes on to point to Seurat as the first ‘proto-digital artist’: “The vibrating points of color in Seurat’s *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (see fig. 25) are the crucial next step in the development of the digitalized sensations we call pixels.” (Kuspit) But it wasn’t until the development of the computer that this system could be pushed further: “With the introduction of the popular Apple Macintosh in 1983, digital art was ready to be made: Seurat’s bits of color could be "realized" as electronic bits of information.” (Kuspit)
Interestingly, this article reminded me that my first digital painting happened in 1983 – when I was eleven years old. On an Apple computer, I was taught how to type in the binary code of “x” and “y” grid coordinates and numbers to “turn on” a specific color for pixels displayed on screen. My reference drawing that I produced with color pencil on grid paper was a simple house design with two windows and a tree. I remember hitting the enter key once the last line of code was typed in and seeing the image I had mapped out on paper now illuminated in my eyes. When class ended I turned off the computer and the image disappeared – but I can close my eyes today and still see that image of the house clearly.
Although I do not think it wise to start a thesis as a challenge to one’s own identity, for the sake of a personal journey, or to question why one chooses to ask certain questions with one’s art, I find it ironic that I have still done just that. I considered myself a classical painter, ready to stand in defense of the reification of the painting as an art object. Now I see that I have always been more intrigued by the creative processes of painting, the thinking that develops from painting as a practice, and with the image that is left in the mind and memory of the viewer with light.
REFERENCES


