



# Flat Paintings and Intimate Screens\*

## 평평한 회화와 친밀한 스크린

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### 투고자 소개

Daniel Sturgis is professor in painting at the University of the Arts London. He studied at Camberwell College of Arts (1986-89) Goldsmiths College (1992-1994) and received a PhD from Oxford Brookes (2008). Sturgis' work is regularly exhibited in the UK and internationally and has featured at public galleries including: Langgeng Art Foundation (Yogyakarta), The Pier Art Centre (Stromness), Musée des Beaux-Arts de Cambrai, The Chinati Foundation (Marfa, Texas), Camden Art Centre (London), and Turner Contemporary (Margate). Notable recent exhibitions include *Daniel Sturgis and Dan Walsh: The Science of Painting* at Luca Tommasi, Milan (2021), *Playground Structure* at Blain Southern, London (2017) and the solo presentation *The Way It Is* at Luca Tommasi, Milan (2018). His curated projects include: *Bauhaus Utopia in Crisis* Camberwell Space & Bauhaus-Universität Weimar (2019, 2021), *Against Landscape*, Grizedale Arts (2017), *The Indiscipline of Painting*, Tate St Ives (2011), Daniel Buren *Voile Toile/Toile Voile*, Wordsworth Trust (2005) and Jeremy Moon *A Retrospective*, Kettle's Yard (2000). Sturgis was a specialist selector and chapter author for Phaidon's *Vitamin P3*, is an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Painting* and has written for Burlington Contemporary and Texte zur Kunst.

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## Abstract

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### Flat Paintings and Intimate Screens

Sturgis, Daniel (University of the Arts London/Professor)

This article is a development, from a presentation given at the 'Painting in the Age of Digital Reproduction' symposium at Art Sonje Centre, Seoul in May 2023. The paper reflects on the implications, and ethics of encountering paintings digitally as reproductions on screens and on mobile devices. It explores the idea of the digital reproduction of a painting being a translation of an artwork, and considers the idea of the close-up as used by the British filmmaker Simon Eaves, in his film *Portrait of a Painting* (2022), which depicts one of my paintings.

### 평평한 회화와 친밀한 스크린

다니엘 스테기스 (런던예술대학교/교수)

이 글은 2023년 5월 서울 아트선재센터에서 개최된 '디지털 복제 시대의 회화' 세미나에서 발표했던 글을 발전시킨 것으로, 회화를 스크린과 모바일 기기에서 디지털 방식으로 복제하는 것과 마주할 때의 충격과 윤리적 측면을 조명해 보고자 하였다. 이 연구에서 나는 영국의 영화 제작자 사이먼 이브즈가 그의 영화 <회화의 초상>(2022)에서 나의 그림들 가운데 하나를 클로즈업하여 묘사한 것을 토대로, 클로즈업의 개념에 대해 고찰해 보고, 회화에 대한 디지털 복제가 예술작품에 대한 번역이 될 수 있다는 아이디어를 검토해 보았다.

### 주제어 Keywords

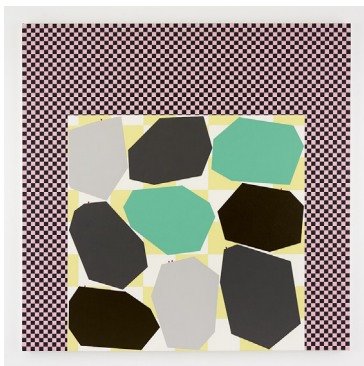
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Abstract Painting(추상회화), Digital Documentation(디지털 문서화), Digital Reproduction(디지털 복제), Translation(번역), Portrait of Painting(회화의 초상)

As a painter, I sometimes like to think of paintings as flat sculptures. Although the paintings I make don't exactly push their sculptural qualities—they are not made with bulky stretcher-bars that stand proud and object like from the wall, nor are they covered in a thick and modelled surface of impasto. Rather they have a very smooth, uninflected surface, built up slowly with many layers of thin acrylic paint. Yet this material quality is integral to these paintings. The fact is that they are super-flat, and almost look printed or machine made. Super-flat, but on a toothed and woven cotton-duck canvas. Indeed, it is only through close looking—of the painting perhaps “beckoning” to you to look closely—that you see that this surface is actually hand-painted. It is only on close examination that the paintings, which look bold, designed and manufactured, reveal themselves to be not so perfect. They reveal their making. You see—just visible—pencil lines delineating each check or shape. You see how the paint has been applied carefully, to stay as much as possible inside of these graphite lines. You see the fragility and difficulty of that task—but also its simplicity. So, what one might think is printed, or made somehow mechanically or with masking tape, stencils or some other nod to industrial assistance, actually just shows itself to have been made simply with paint, brushes, rulers and a pencil. Through a process that, I like to think, perhaps the viewer can identify with. For, have we not all used these tools at one time or another. And do we all not know about the materiality of paint, maybe as when a child we painted a picture, or as an adult a wall or window frame. So, through this act of close looking the painting shows ‘the way it is’.<sup>1</sup> The way the

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1 “*The Way It Is*” was the title of a solo presentation of my paintings at Luca Tommasi Gallery in Milan in 2018. Daniel Sturgis, *The Way It Is, exh. cat.* (Milan: Luca Tommasi, 2018).



**Figure 1** Daniel Sturgis, *Studied Abandon 2*  
acrylic on canvas, 153 x 153cm, 2021

painting has been made. And this, of course, may be at odds with how you might have expected the painting to have been made. It may seem to have been made in almost the wrong way. Perhaps too laboriously and taking too much time.

And, this temporal reflection is of course also echoed in the painting's overall compositions, which seems fast and quick. The compositions reference past abstract painting, as well as the world of quick modern design. So, through indirect quotations, rather than the directness of appropriation, the paintings acknowledge the old modernist catalyst of the tension between high and the low, the supposedly serious and the knowingly frivolous. By combining a pictorial vocabulary which oscillates between the language of past abstract painting—hard-edged, factual, constructivist, and built on the certitude of systems of belief—and that of today's visual world—the world of totally-designed trainers, bright screens with their overloaded colours and compositional combinations—I hope my paintings speak to the present both visually and theoretically. And this coming together, like the geometry in my paintings, is built in a way, that is “inexact but precise,” to quote the Spanish cubist Juan Gris, whose mantra has acted as a loadstone for my painting in recent years.<sup>2</sup> This in-exactitude seems to resonate for me, with the very human way I negotiate the world—with how history plays on

2 Quoted in Edward B. Henning, “Two New Modern Paintings,” *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 52:1 (January, 1965): 7–18.

the present, with how change is always a constant, but also importantly with how difference must be embraced, and how optimism can be used as a weapon against stasis and indifference.

My paintings are therefore built through a considered reflection on how conceptually both their materiality and composition interact, and how this interaction speaks theoretically. However, I am always deeply disappointed when, as now, I look at one of my paintings digitally reproduced on a screen. The colours are wrong. The scale is wrong. The material experience is wrong. The encounter that the viewer has with the work on the screen is wrong. Yet everybody sees something which although wrong, wrong, wrong—is something that I recognise.

Indeed, the digital reproduction may have a particular resonance. And one that warrants further thought. For it may be seen projected, in a lecture hall, but it is perhaps more likely to be viewed in the palm of one's hand. The painting held and touched on the smooth cold glass screen of a phone or digital tablet. The painting, or its digital translation, has slipped—in a true, post-format manner—from an artwork made to be viewed through an embodied visual encounter in a gallery or on a wall, to a very intimate and interactive encounter, one that is as Michelle White has pointed out overtly—sensual, un-fixed and provisional.<sup>3</sup> And these frustratingly *are* qualities, which I like to think my paintings embrace, through their shifting formal and material composition, just as they are integral to this fleeting digital encounter. But yet I find the digital encounter disappointing.

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3 For a discussion on the sensual relationship of the touch screen, see Michele White, *Touch Screen Theory: Digital Devices and Feelings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2022).



**Figure 2** Installation view, *Transfer: Korean and British Abstract Painting and the Digital Document*, 2023, at Korean Cultural Centre UK. Courtesy the artist and Korean Cultural Centre UK, photo by Seowon Nam

It need not be though. I think *The Materiality of Painting* project—which this conference forms a part of—points to many ways that the digital translation of paintings can be meaningful.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to remember that I am talking here about translations. That there are

works—real paintings—that exist in a material and physical manner outside of their translation in ‘real life’. So, I am not concerning myself in this instance with artworks that were conceived primarily for a digital encounter—to be seen on a screen. Nor those artworks that knowingly were created to speak to the blurred boundaries between the digital realm and the physical world that we occupy. Like the post-internet practice of Artie Vierkant, which he theorised in his influential text “The Image Object Post-Internet” in 2011 and his ongoing series of *Image Object* artworks. Here [and I quote] “works [...] exist somewhere between physical sculptures and altered documentation images.”<sup>5</sup> In this instance Vierkant created bright painterly sculptures from digital files that confuse digital and physical space through their form, materiality and rendering. This confusion is then further enhanced when the artworks are photographed, as multiple, different, altered digital

4 *The Materiality of Painting* is the shortened title of the University of the Arts, Economic and Social Research Council funded research project. See *The Digital Documentation of Materiality in Painting: The Case of Contemporary Korean and British Abstract Art*, <https://www.arts.ac.uk/research/current-research-and-projects/materiality-of-painting> (accessed 29 April 2023)

5 Artie Vierkant, “The Image Object Post-Internet,” 2011, <http://artievierkant.com/writing.php> (accessed 29 April 2023).

files are used officially as the documentation of the work. (Again, I quote from his writing) “Each time the pieces are documented *officially* (i.e., by the artist or by a gallery), the documentation photos are altered to create a new form which [do] not accurately represent the physical object, [but] generate new derivative works that build upon the initial objects.”<sup>6</sup>

However, what I am interested in thinking about is not this blurring, but how paintings can be translated into the digital realm and still hold onto some of the complexity and integrity that they have in a real embodied physical encounter. How the digital can be of service to the painting rather than the painting being of service to the digital.

One great example of the translation of paintings, that bridges the analogue and digital, whilst reflecting on the medium of translation itself, I see in the book the painter Mary Heilmann’s made called ‘All Night Movie’(1999).<sup>7</sup> This publication, was based on Heilmann’s unique way of doing illustrated talks for art college audiences. In these she combines snapshot images of both her paintings, and her life, together with a heavy dose of spoken biographical reflection. This multifaceted coming together seems important with respect to her painterly vision—where her abstract painting is based on confident, loose references from the world around her, be that of ‘waves, roads or visions’, to para-phrase the title of her 2012 exhibition at Hauser and Wirth in London.<sup>8</sup> The relative, and in some cases extreme, poverty of these photographic

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6 Vierkant, “The Image Object Post-Internet,” <http://artievierkant.com/imageobjects.php> (accessed 29 April 2023).

7 Mary Heilmann, *The All Night Movie* (Zurich: Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Offizin, 1999).

8 *Mary Heilmann: Visions, Waves and Roads*, exhibition in London, Hauser and Wirth, 23 Feb – 5 Apr 2012. See <https://www.hauserwirth.com/hauser-wirth-exhibitions/4022-mary-heilmann-visions-waves-and-roads/>

images—their snap-shot quality—and how Heilmann uses them in her talks in abundance, with music and in quick-fire succession, is startling.<sup>9</sup> No image is on the screen for very long at all. And this fast and loose method, links this mix of analogue and digital photographs, to the immaterial qualities that the artist Hito Steyerl sees in what she calls ‘poor images’. For Steyerl the degradation of the low-resolution digital file, that has been uploaded and downloaded and shared on multiple devices “transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction.”<sup>10</sup> Something similar happens with Heilmann’s laid-back presentations, the paintings which have been made for an exhibition, become through the encounter in the slide-show presentation or her folksy-publication recontextualised as disinterested cult-images, that are almost divorced from their expected surroundings and source. However, unlike Steyerl’s position, the paintings still exist. They have not been overtaken and fully replaced by low-res pixels as Steyerl would like. Heilmann’s snap-shots still refer back to her paintings, and indeed through biography are fetishized, rather than dematerialise. For Steyerl the digital image would fully replace the real. These degraded digital images had exaggerated, through digital and technological advancements, a further change in art’s aesthetic “aura”, to return to ideas in Walter Benjamin “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”<sup>11</sup> Steyerl states “The poor image is no

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9 Mary Heilmann gave a talk at Camberwell College of Arts 10th November 2011, where the author saw her add some very low-resolution pixelated digital images that she had just taken on her phone to her presentation.

10 Hito Steyerl, “In Defence of the Poor Image,” *E Flux Journal* 10 (November 2009): para 1 of 32, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>, (accessed 16 April 2023).

11 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), Penguin Great Ideas, Trans. J. A. Underwood (Harlow, England: Penguin Books, 2008).



longer about the real thing—the ordinary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities.”<sup>12</sup>

If Heilmann was happy to embrace the poor snap-shot, loose presentation and biography to capture the essence of her paintings photographically, I wonder if the close-up maybe a way to harbour my own paintings for an intimate digital encounter. For the exhibition *Transfer* at the Korean Cultural Centre in London<sup>13</sup>, I asked the filmmaker Simon Eaves to make a portrait of one of my paintings. We met in my studio and discussed my work and his processes. And one area where we found common ground was thinking how the digital camera, and the lens, can see far more than the eye. It can see more clearly, and through close-up and macro-lenses in far greater detail than we can. The camera can see what we cannot. A close-up photograph or film is not the painting. But it can show us things *in* the painting that we cannot actually see. With all sorts of lights and rigs Simon filmed close-up

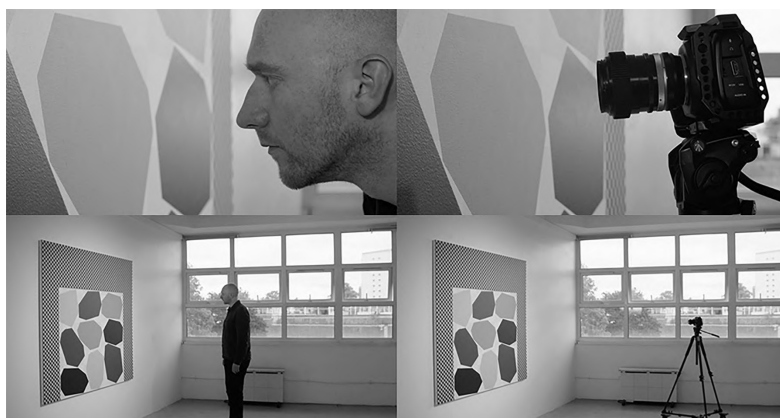


Figure 3 Simon Eaves, still from *Portrait of a Painting*, 2022

12 Ibid.

13 Exhibition of *Transfer*, Korean Cultural Centre in London, 24 February–14 April 2023.

details of my painting, *Studied Abandon 2* (2022). The camera in both still and slowly panning shots revealed the materiality of the paint, the tooth of the canvas, and the fragility of the pencil lines. All qualities that are in the work—integral to it—and that with careful looking in real-life one understands are present. However, close-up photography enabled these hand-made qualities in the work, to be enhance and become visible for a digital audience. Although these qualities are revealed in a way quite unlike how the work is encountered in real life, the close-up scanning shot allows for an intimacy that seems to resonate with both a painting beckoning one over to take a closer look, and the sensual voyeurism that the phone’s digital screen elicits. It is for this reason that I find these short-filmed clips strangely satisfying. They are not the painting but they encapsulate some qualities that our central to the painting in them.

Walter Benjamin reflected in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” on how cinematic close-ups reveal hidden details, and how the invention of the camera created a completely new world with a different nature. He states

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring common place milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; [and] on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action.<sup>14</sup>

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14 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*(1936), quoted in Katy Pendlebury, “Cutting Across the Century: An Investigation of the Close-up and the Long-shot in “Cine-Choreography” since the Invention of the Camera,” *The International Journal of Screendance*, vol. 4, (The Ohio State University Libraries, 2014).

Benjamin, therefore recognised how the camera lens and its ability to zoom in close changed our understanding of the world, and the unique technological qualities of the camera lens impacted on both what it presented and how it presented it. And this development had the potential to change the nature of both art and society.

Undoubtedly the hand-held phone and digital tablet have done something similar. I think we can agree that the glow of the screen has seduced and changed art and society, in a way that is similar but different to that of the cinematic projection due to its intimacy. We want to look closely and perhaps for some the digital has become a prerequisite to look closely. When visiting the Powerlong Museum in Shanghai recently I was very aware of how new museum-lighting systems, which could brightly isolate and light a drawing within its frame, caused the artworks to glow as if they were presented on digital screens. A glow that changes ones interpretation of the work.

In Erin Brannigan's book *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* (2011) the author argues how the tradition of filming dance and the use of close-ups has enabled a new decentralized choreography to immerse.<sup>15</sup> One that builds on, what Brannigan describes as Western contemporary dances' non-hierarchical attitude to the body, and that recognises the significance of the micro-gestures within dance, such as those captured in the filmic closeups of hands, or backs, or toes. And indeed, as Katy Pendlebury has pointed out, that in turn leads to a new type of dance, which comes out of close-up-filmic-looking, such as *Hands* (1995) choreographed

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15 Erin Brannigan, *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image Paperback* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

by Jonathan Burrows and filmed by Adam Roberts, which focuses on the seemingly inconsequential play of hand movements whilst referencing the romanticism of the close-up in European cinematic traditions.<sup>16</sup>

This ability for the close-up to look non-hierarchically is important. And again, it seems to resonate with qualities in my paintings—of how the marginal holds significance, and how it is possible to have multiple compositional voices within a singular work. But the close-up does another thing that as well, it abstracts, as it detaches elements from their contexts. You don't see the whole picture. In doing so it may also complicate the binary split between the painting and its translation, for the close up-shot is its own thing. It doesn't do the job of translation very well, as so much is missed, and there is such a distanced between it and the original source. It complicates the boundaries between the real object and its immaterial digital encounter. It is not merely a reproduction of the former. Yet it holds aspects of the painting that I see as important. It is the ability of the close-up to question our understand of the real painting and the digital encounter that I see as interesting. To question the binary split. This close, scanning, detail celebrates the paintings materiality and intimacy, whilst not conflating the real and digital world.

The desire for the digital translation of the painting to hold integrity is not quite the same as a desire for both the digital reproduction and the original painting to hold in Benjamin's term a similar "auratic quality". Bruno Latour, we will remember, has argued in certain instances, that this is indeed the case. Famously

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<sup>16</sup> See Pendlebury, 'Cutting Across the Century: An Investigation of the Close-up and the Long-shot in "Cine-Choreography" (2014).

when wrote about how he experienced a greater auratic feeling when contemplating a digital reproduction of Veronese wall painting *Le Nozze di Cana* at the Palladian refectory in Venice, the original location of the work, rather than when contemplating the real painting in the Louvre. The hyperrealism the digital and its contextual frame exceed and trumped the experience of original painting.<sup>17</sup>

However, when I think of the integrity of the translation and its medium, as being central, it is less a focus on the 'auratic' but rather more on the translation of the artistic intention within the work. Does the digital translation still hold some of the qualities of the original painting? Does the digital translation still have an integrity—an honesty and consistency that the artist would recognise? Are there qualities in the digital reproduction that are also in the painting? This is what I think needs to be recognised, balanced and checked.

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17 Bruno Latour, Adam Lowe, "The Migration of the Aura or How to Explore the Original Through its Facsimiles," in *Switching Codes. Thinking Through Digital Technology in the Humanities and the Arts*, eds., T. Bartscherer and R. Coover (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 275-97.

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