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The Reassurance of Atmospherics - Dan Hays

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The immateriality and infinite reproducibility of digital information presents significant phenomenological shifts in the entwined relationship between painting and photography. The virtual matrix supporting digital images reveals the mechanics of illusion in pixelated close-up, reminiscent of representational painting's abstracted, brush-stroked surface. Seamless computer simulations of three-dimensional space, or different painting styles combined with intended and accidental atmospheric effects and filters, dissolve distinctions between the two media.

A fascination with the special qualities of electronic and digital imagery, growing out of Photorealist painting techniques, led to my on-going Colorado Impressions project. Through an Internet search In 1999 I discovered another Dan Hays, living in Colorado, USA. His website consists of numerous photographs of the Rocky Mountain landscape surrounding his home, as well as a live webcam. With his permission a series of oil paintings based on his pictures was initiated: "As for my images feel free to use whatever you wish, consider them yours and original if you wish. If I didn't forget they were up there most of the time I would probably take them down because they are so blurry etc…"

My exploration of the strong formal associations between digital image compression and Impressionism has grown in complexity, bringing into the frame questions around authentic experience and imaginative projection. My research into photographic source material has extended to websites across the whole state of Colorado in this arduously slow and robotic pictorial expedition, forming a kind of displaced and immobilized homage to the exploits of the Hudson River School painters of the 19th century, and the romantic ideals of American Transcendentalism.

Fig 1 Colorado Impression 11a (after Dan Hays, Colorado), 2002, oil on canvas, 60"x80"

Digital photographs are converted into paintings with the aid of image manipulation software in numerous ways: explorations of colour separation, modulation and inversion; mathematical systems and patterns; restricted palettes and tonal limitation; simulated texture, skewing and lighting effects. These processes serve to highlight painting's imperfect physicality and to subvert the mechanics of illusionism, such as linear and aerial perspectives. The aim has been to generate simultaneous, ambiguous and three-dimensional convergences of the represented scene and the physical surface (or immaterial screen), with subject matter that reflects our idealized and dislocated relationship to the natural.

The quasi-object nature of lenticular printmaking forms an alternative, and in some ways parallel, process to painting in the translation of digital information into the physical realm. Continued experiments with this medium, combining its limited 3D and animation possibilities, will also be discussed.

In terms of landscape depiction remote web-cameras seem to offer an extreme, possibly exemplary demonstration of the Internet's promotion of the aesthetics of functionality. Artistic notions of the picturesque don't come into the frame. They are representations of landscape free from painting's history, so suggesting a more objective visualisation of the natural. Yet these pictures are not free of painterly qualities. Digital photographs are generally compressed to limit the use of computer memory in storing files. Processing functions without regard to a hierarchy of forms,

as grids operate as democratizing agents. Areas of contrast are accentuated and color is simplified, giving rise to accidental effects known as blocking artefacts, which produce surprising abstract forms, generating visual interest at the pixel level. This process is equivalent to the Impressionist imperative to capture the essence of a scene as quickly as possible with a restricted palette of colours, regarding the scene as a whole, employing brushstrokes of a similar size, and returning to the same view in different light conditions.

Low quality digital photographs can be seen as proto-paintings, abstracting visual information, creating painterly effects several removes from the world. We can zoom into these images with a similar wonder to the experience of approaching the surface of a painting, seeing how the illusion is generated. The agent for this is noise, a product of chaos and chance; the anomalies of entropic disintegration through flawed or mediated reproduction.
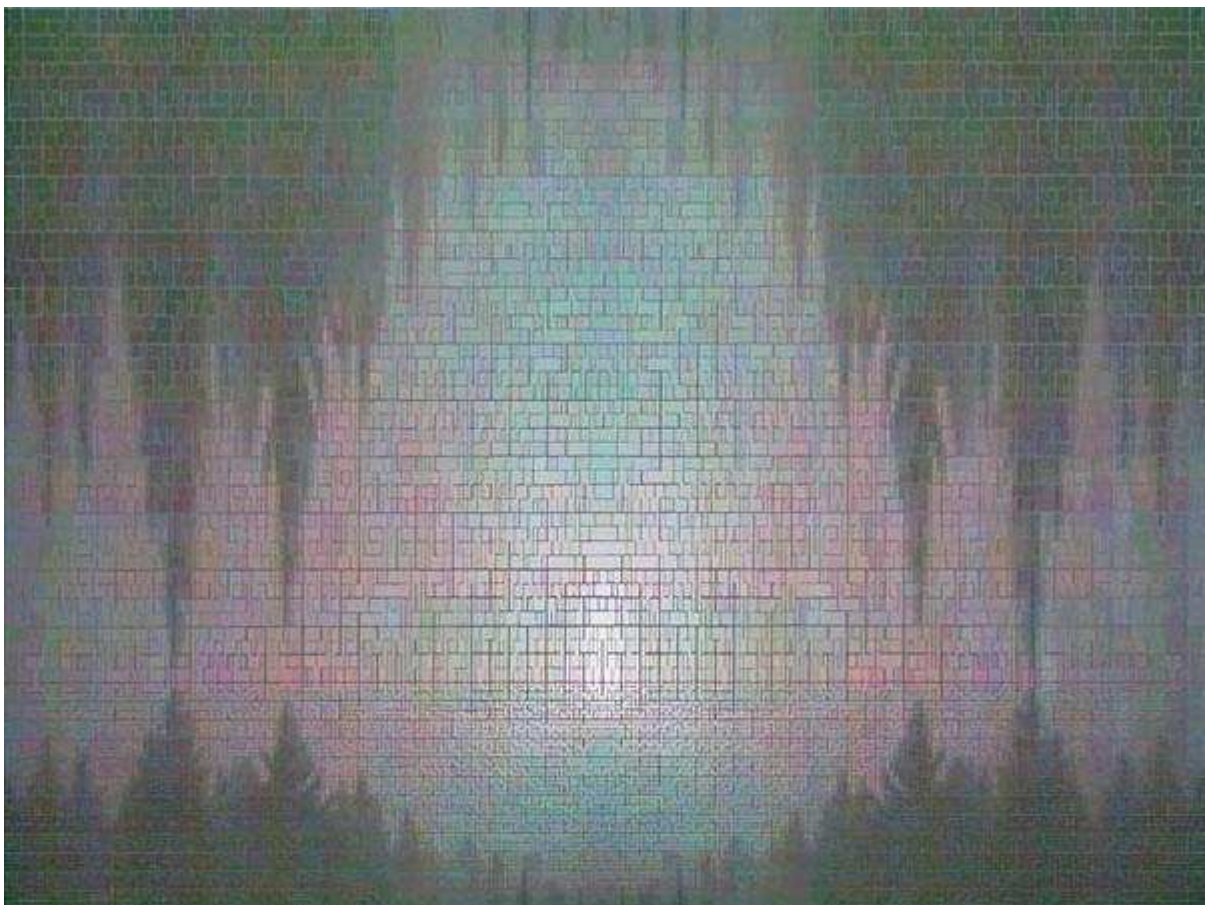

Fig. 2 Colorado Impression 16d, 2007, oil on canvas, 42"x56"

Faithfully reproducing and accentuating digital mistakes and glitches is a painstaking process, working from computer printouts and projections. Oil paint is a subtly inexact medium when matching colour, usually drying slightly darker. By alternating the pigments used in colour mixes and deliberately or accidentally pushing color and tone away from the original, the immaterial and instantaneous digital information is given material and temporal existence in fleshy brushstrokes and daubs.

Representational paintings work by revealing and synthesizing the paradoxes of perception. They simultaneously present the fluid coexistence of the surface and the illusion of depth. Our sense of them is physical, our relationship to them embodied in three-dimensional space.

The noise of flawed painting styles, film grain, half-tone screens or digital compression artifacts are carrier waves for the tangible and the temporal; an in-between space providing the reassurance of atmospherics. Yet there is a widening void in the middle, between surface and illusion, through the dissolution of the human through ever more perfect simulations and higher resolution photography.
The immaterial equivalence of all digital information, from the virtual infinity of the Internet down to the foundational pixel or bit, via discrete objects and catalogs, lends the noise of mistakes in the collection and reproduction of sensory data, of equal value to the supposedly accurate depictive material. This offers a more simultaneous, ambiguous and three-dimensional convergence of the illusory and the surface. This is the great paradox: this infinite virtual source seems to have more veracity due to its comprehensiveness and intimate humanity, short-circuiting the universal and the local, the objective and subjective.

Fig.3 Twilight in the Wilderness (after Dan Hays and Frederick Church), 2005, oil on canvas, 60"x80"

The Internet represents a near infinite expansion of the mail-order catalog, amateur snapshot or surveillance video; a way of collecting visual information where the aesthetics of simple functionality or mediocrity is observed, as there is virtually no

material cost involved. It would seem that found images are all we have, thanks to the Internet's primary function as consumer and diffuser of information, a generator of simulacra: fugitive bi-products of systems of genetic and socio-economic determinism and control, the seamless coalition of the global and the personal, and the perpetuation of empty signs and products. The digital realm is a shadowy, ethereal, parallel world - an endlessly refracted trace of humanity. We can only engage with a few images that emerge, half frozen, from this endlessly reproducible, unverifiable, and immaterial source. The analogy is memory. How is it possible to navigate this vortex of information? We need to find or invent refuges.

The painter and object of attention are in a relationship. This is one of a possessive kind of love - a romantic attachment. Colorado chose me by chance, initially through the channel of Dan Hays's website. My devotion to it has given rise to a sense of colonization that is mutual. This love is, necessarily, unrequited. Physically going to the real Colorado would destroy the reverie of what has become a mythic place, the land of COLOR, inhabited by an alternative Dan Hays. In this way I lose myself and find myself: subject and object become fused, consuming each other; realizing the dream of becoming a figure in landscape, at one with nature, within a painted illusion, within a digital wilderness.

Fig. 4 Self-Portrait, 2005, oil on canvas, 30"x40"

My use of a namesake, and by extension his landscape, as a subject is intended to be interpreted as an allegory for a search for meaning and self when confronted with a seeming infinity of possibilities. The arbitrary and uncanny aspects of my project

hopefully transcend the personal in this post-digital age. The Internet simply manifests extreme challenges to certainties of identity, knowledge, and the nature of existence that are as old as the hills.

The other Dan Hays is the real Dan Hays. I am his shadowy double, his virtual ghost, his Second Life avatar. I have no materiality. I'm just a two-dimensional painter-parasite, skimming the surface of the looking glass. This mirrored existential trap offers deliverance from self: freedom from responsibility at the same time as a disembodied communion with nature - sublimation within the digital wilderness. Watery associations with the flood of images generated by the Internet and the fluidity of the space between the virtual and actual abound. Below the shimmering surface there are a myriad of invisible agencies in the generation of what comes to our perception, suggestive of the spectral realm. These range, for example, from the complex and often arbitrary cataloguing processes of search engines down to the abstracting effects of data compression and corruption. Veracity, transience, expression, timelessness, physicality, uniqueness, and all qualities that are used to explore the relationship of painting and photography are dissolved.
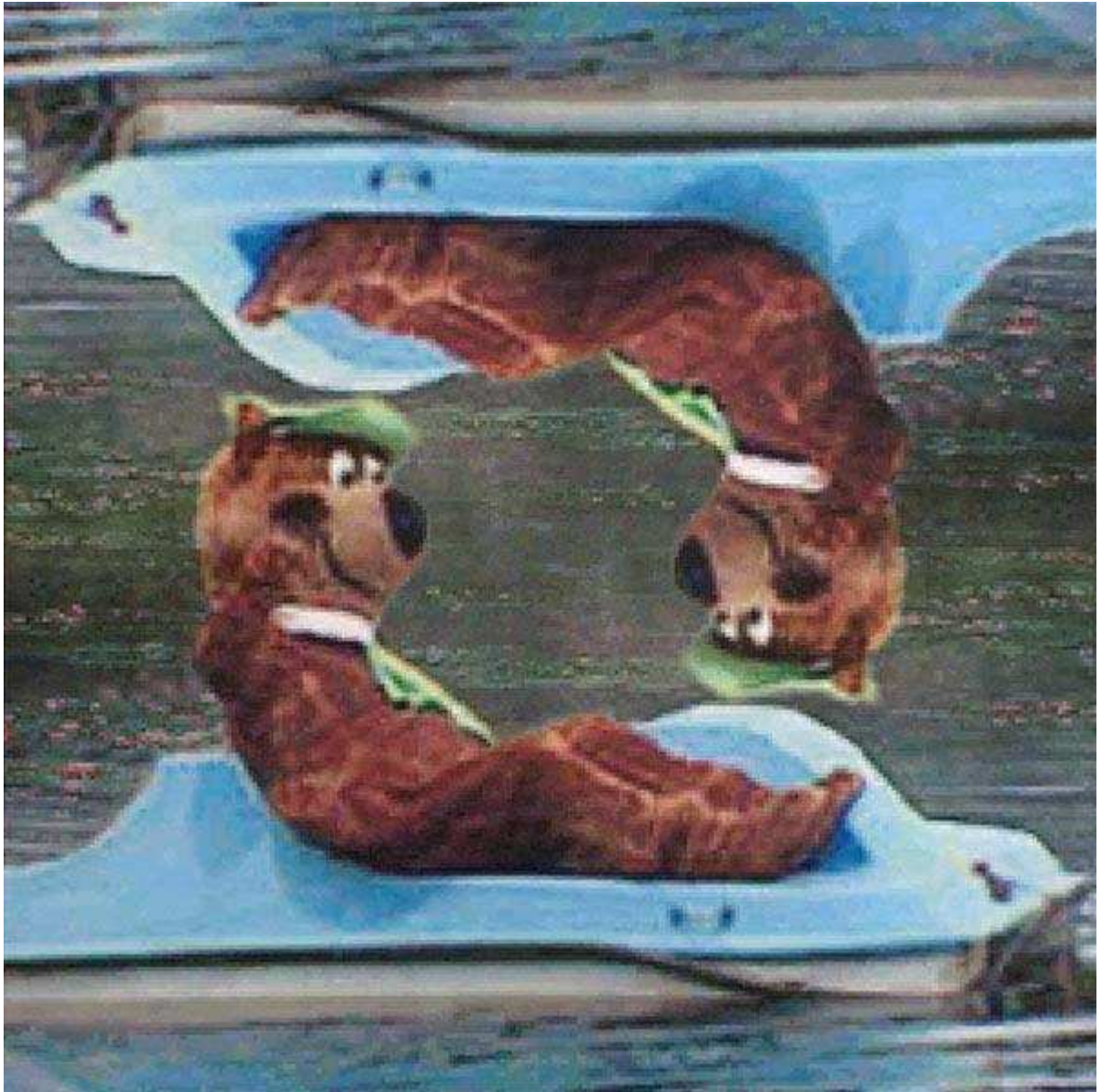
Fig. 5 The End of Time, 2007, oil on canvas, 60"x60"

It's somewhere within this uncanny space that the hyper-real simulations of lenticular 3D image making comes into the frame, as the uses for this technology have barely progressed from 'magic' or 'ghostly' spectacle; the capturing of 'spirits' associated with early photography. There is room for experimentation through the deconstruction and subversion of the mechanics of lenticular design, and its abiding associations with commercial or popular imagery. Contrasting with photography and film, and painting before them, the nature of this medium, its special qualities and abilities to transfer meaning through self-reflexive material metaphor, has barely been explored. Its optical limitations and ambiguities provide opportunities for creative intervention. The parallel lines of the lenticules present the immaterial screen made physical: a transparent manufactured version of the materiality of paint, necessarily having a thickness. The fragility of the 3D illusion, dependent on the position of the viewer, echoes the mobility of the painting observer.

Lenticulars are completely about illusionism, the ridged surface having subliminal physicality. Yet they have a curiously equivalent two-fold nature to painting's surface and illusion of depth, of either 3D or animation effects. Bringing together a fragile coalition of these mutually excluding perceptual processes, it's possible to manufacture a disembodied metaphor for the syntheses and contradictions of human perception and subjectivity activated by painting, rather than a limited extension of photography into the third dimension or the temporal. Quasi-painting.

Recent experiments in painting and lenticular 3D are collectively titled Colorado Snow Effects, and tackle a visual conundrum. Snowscapes are black and white, or at least the absence of colour, so long as the sky is grey, is not immediately apparent in many cases. In these works the snowy scene is depicted with pixels of pure saturated colour. From a long distance these points of colour optically merge and form a greyscale image, revealing the subtle tones required to appreciate the forms of pine trees or line of a hillside. At close range colour perception takes over and the impression is one of abstracted colored noise. These paintings play with ideas of 'snow' on a TV screen, the noise between channels; landscape as background and background radiation; and by paying futile homage to the use of additive colour implemented by Impressionism and Pointillism. Whereas the intentions of these was to emulate the immediacy of atmospheric scintillation, representing a 'natural' impression of a scene bathed in light, the use of pure colour to represent a grey landscape seems a ridiculous optical overindulgence; the metaphorical connections between snow, whiteness, silence and purity are subverted through the pathos of exuberant, noisy colour.

Fig. 6 Colorado Snow Effect 4, 2007, oil on canvas, 48"x64"

The reassurance of atmospherics is found through fabricating visual allegories for the fleeting or transient in the face of perfect simulation. Imperfect, tangible simulations implicate an embodied, mobile viewer. This is in contrast to the hypothetically fixed, monocular viewpoint dictated by linear perspective, the supposed panoptic visualizations of Cubism, and the polyvalence of the computer's virtual windows. Examining the seductions of perceptual ambiguity, thresholds of recognition, abstraction and loss through a synthesis of digital reproduction and painting, opens space for metaphysical reflection, whilst excluding the distractions of stylistic expression, virtuosity or affectation.

Painting is an exemplary field in which to explore the duality of perfect resemblance and absolute chaos engendered by entropy. For we are lost to the garden, removed from nature, and painting operates as a technique to reconnect to the primal, a way of transforming immaterial representations back into physical objects.