

Digital Drawing and the Creative Process:

In Response to Dr. Paul Hamilton, *Drawing with printmaking technology in a digital age*, (Published in Tracey, 2009)

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Summary:

Hamilton (2009) in *Drawing with printmaking technology in a digital age* discusses the role of drawing in relation to printmaking in the light of current digital technology. He argues that digital technology could pose a threat to the development of traditional drawing skills. Digital software makes it possible to produce visual images without requiring any drawing skills. The danger of this is that the work lacks originality and becomes slick. The question is raised as to whether digital technology poses a threat to the “nature and value “of drawing in a printmaking context. Hamilton goes on to discuss what he considers the value of drawing and looks at ways in which digital technology can be used to enhance the creative process.

This paper was written in direct response to Hamilton as the issues that he raises resonate strongly with my own creative project. In my own paper *Drawing in a digital world* 2009 there are a number of interesting parallels. Coming from a printmaking background as I do, I value drawing as an essential part of my creative process. My experimentation with digital drawing and digital animation has made me aware of what Hamilton refers to as the potential for ‘cross

fertilisation between traditional and digital platforms' (Hamilton, 2009, p.14).

Drawing as the 'essence of creativity'

Hamilton (p. 2) associates drawing with creativity and sees it as a way of realizing potential for 'real innovation':

The value of drawing is associated with the knowledge that drawing is the essence of creativity and its measure would lie in the individual artists ability to continuously express and create, using self-exploration and creative thinking through the process of drawing, linking together „interesting ideas“ and „technical know-how“, enhanced by assistance and interaction with print media.

The idea that drawing is the 'essence of creativity' is one that I share. I regard drawing as an essential element in my creative process. This dates back to my art school training with its strong emphasis on drawing.

A threat to drawing

Hamilton (p. 3) raises the point that computers could be seen as a threat to drawing. This fear is based on the fact that the use of computers can lead to 'instant art' that is superficial and slick or kitsch. He warns against the use of programmed simulation and calls for students to be 'exposed to more quality drawing time'. In my case, having come to computers late in my career, this is not an issue that overly concerns me. I have a solid grounding in drawing. On the contrary, I do not see computers as a threat to drawing, rather, I am interested in how they can influence and enhance my drawing skills.

Drawing with new technology

New media can offer the artist the opportunity to go beyond manual technologies. Drawing with new technology need not be limited to the imitation of 'manual technologies'. Hamilton (p. 2) quotes Eames (2004) who explores the 'opportunities

and possibilities particular and peculiar to that realm as opposed to the imitation of manual technologies’.

When reflecting on my own use of the computer I recognise that I am beginning to break away from imitating manual technologies in terms of the aesthetic look and way of thinking about drawing. What has brought about this change is the introduction of digital animation into my creative process. I think that the realisation of the ability to animate my drawings, afforded by the computer, brought about a significant shift in my creative thinking. In this sense I began to explore the opportunities mentioned by Eames. Not only did the use of computer drawing allow me to explore animation, it also influenced my conceptual approach to drawing. Rather than using drawing as a purely perceptual tool to explore physical phenomena, I began to use it as a tool to explore my imagination and my emotions. Although, admittedly my traditional drawings do have imaginative and emotional qualities, the computer allowed me to develop a series of drawings relatively quickly in a kind of stream of visual consciousness. This was something entirely new for me. The computer provided me with a tool that actively stimulated and enhanced my creative process in a way that traditional tools had not done.

Hamilton (p. 3) points out that the digital medium ‘ has constraints, qualities and limitations just as traditional media do’. One of the characteristics of computer drawing that distinguishes it from traditional media is its lack of physical interaction. Hamilton refers to Cohen (2002) who says that “computer-based art making processes are medium-less, consequently, (there are) no skill-based disciplines to learn.”

It was this very lack of physical interaction that influenced my decision to interpret my digital drawings in an extremely physical and tactile medium, viz. woodcut panels. In these works I emphasise the ‘constraints, qualities and limitations’ of both the virtual and physical media.



Figure 1: John Roome, 2006. *Helicopter*, Digital drawing.



Figure 2: John Roome, 2006. *Helicopter*, Wood panel, 120 x 92.5 cm

Unique visual qualities of computer drawing

Hamilton (p. 4) refers to the 'unique visual qualities' of computer drawing.

The quality of the computer line is similar in visual appearance to conventional drawing media, but possesses qualities that differ from traditional lines, this becomes more obvious as the computer line is enlarged and begins to demonstrate pixilation.

The mark-making and overall aesthetic look of my wood panels references the pixilation of the digital mark. The process of enlarging the digital drawings and hand carving the lines using only vertical and horizontal cutting, emphasises the pixilation.

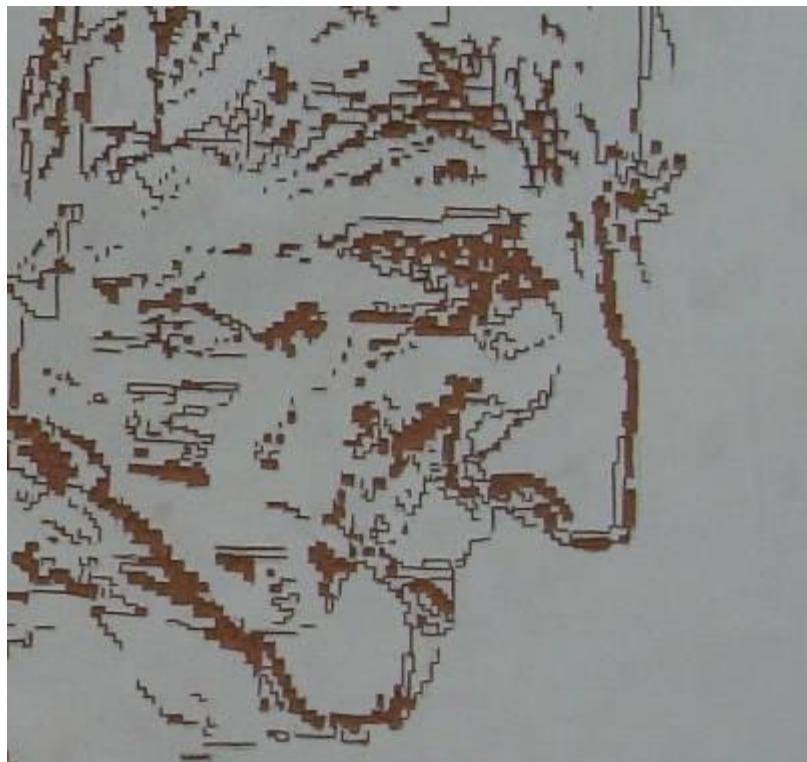


Figure 3: John Roome, 2009. *Journey into the Ineffable*, (detail), Wood panel, 138.5 x 92.5 cm

My laborious, labour-intensive technique of hand carving is the direct antithesis of the high-speed computer drawing process. These woodcut drawings literally 'slow down' the digital and perhaps in this way they can be seen as a comment on my own ambivalent position in relation to technology. It is one of fascination and fear, acceptance and rejection. In Prensky's terms (Prensky, 2001. *Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants*) I am a typical digital immigrant struggling to adapt to my fast

changing environment whilst still holding on to my traditional values. Unlike 'the children of the digital age (who) expect things to happen fast, because in their world things do happen fast' (Tapscott: 1998, p.74, in Hamilton, 2009), I am desperately trying to slow down my world.

When giving a presentation on my work to a group of first year media-design students (Roome. 2010) I was struck by the fact that they were much more interested in my digital work than in the hand-made work. They seemed to be unable to understand why anyone would want to spend so much time and hard physical labour making art. In fact, even the way I use the digital medium appears to be too slow in the eyes of these 'digital natives'. Upon explaining my animation process I was met with comments that this was far too laborious and time consuming. I am certain that it is possible to create animations using sophisticated software in less than half the time. However the aesthetic look and feel of the work, which is a direct result of the 'quaint' process, did meet with their approval and was agreed to be 'cool'.

Journey into the Ineffable can be viewed at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqDABn2iphQ>

I have found examples on *You Tube* of young artists (mainly printmakers) who use even more labour intensive means of producing animations. Mark Andrew Webber has coined the term 'linomation' for his method of animating lino-cut images. Webber produces 1.5 minutes of animation using a process that took him 450-500 hours. He produced 296 individual lino cut blocks that were scanned and animated. He then printed all 296 blocks and scanned and animated the prints. Interestingly, my process involves making a similar number of individual images, but in my case the frames are drawn digitally. In my case the carving or cutting is used to make large woodcuts that are exhibited together with the animation.

Slowing down the digital

My need to slow down the digital may have a lot to do with my training as an artist in a tradition that valued drawing not only as an investigative, and analytical tool but as

a reflective and expressive medium as well. Working at speed enhances spontaneity and the free flow of ideas but it does not allow for reflection. I agree with Eames (2004, in Hamilton 2009) who believes “drawing promotes individual thought, action and, critically, reflection upon that action.” Working digitally does not prevent one from being reflective. I have found that drawing on a digital tablet can be as slow and reflectively engaging as working in traditional media.

Tradition

One of the unique aspects of digital media is their lack of an established tradition. Hamilton suggests that this is why many artists using digital media make reference to traditional media for authentication (p. 6). When I started working digitally, I instinctively imagined what the images would look like as prints or paintings. Showing them as animated sequences allowed them to exist as purely virtual images, but I was not satisfied with this and felt the need to translate at least some of them into traditional, tactile, physical, real objects. Hamilton (p.6) explains this reaction:

It would appear that the tactile aspects of traditional processes remain important to artists and the physical dimension is attributable to the relationship with technology and visual dynamic content. There can be a blending of traditions that appears to function as correlation between technology, simulation, representation and visual language.

The value of drawing

Hamilton’s description of the drawing process seems to suggest that the change of tool does not alter the essential nature of drawing, as a means of enquiry and expression (p. 5).

The drawing process involves moving a line that carries emotion and reaches out in a way that touches our senses as well as informs both the artist and eventually the viewer. These emotions and feelings can be found within man from birth, and best channelled by using pencil, brush, pen and now mouse and drawing tablet.

Hamilton is suggesting that computer technology, if used in a creative way, in the ‘spirit of adventure’, can enhance creativity. He is further indicating that the

investigative attitude associated with traditional drawing can be incorporated into digital media.

It is precisely this ability of drawing to carry emotion and to inform both artist and viewer that I value. Drawing has this ability regardless of the medium employed and there is no reason why digital drawing cannot do this equally as well as traditional drawing. However, I suspect that this would depend largely on the attitude that the individual artist has to art-making.

New possibilities and dangers

The switch to virtual or digital drawing introduces a further influence on the creative process. Hamilton suggests that digital technology need not spell the end of creative drawing. In fact it can open up new possibilities and stimulate creativity. However there may be dangers.

This is not to say that computer technology has only a negative response, Garner (2004) refers to Goldschmidt who suggests, „computer based drawing can require the maker to approach the creative task with a greater level of predetermined ideas about both the subject and the process.“ Goldschmidt’s statement is somewhat misleading and must be challenged as it is reasonable to suggest that those using the computer and pre-programmed software are dependent on the „predetermined ideas“ of others namely those who have programmed the effects within the software (Hamilton, p.8).

In my work I initially did not use sophisticated software simply because I did not have the skills. My lack of computer knowledge turned out to be a blessing in disguise as it forced me to improvise and invent my own processes for drawing and animation. I was aware that there were faster and more sophisticated methods of producing animation effects, but I was also aware of the ubiquitous quality of work produced using animation software. The method I developed had a lot to do with my experience with traditional media, particularly woodcut printmaking. The limitations imposed by the software I had available (*Microsoft Paint*) echoed the limitations of the relief print medium. The end result, I feel, bears more of my own signature than that of the computer. In my case the decision to avoid sophisticated software reduced the danger of “predetermined ideas”.

Amongst artists and designers there are different approaches to new technology. There are those who are interested in creating their own computer programmes that they employ in their art making process. Many of the early pioneers of digital art fall into this category. Recent developments in commercially available, and user friendly, creative software have allowed artists with no programming skills to make use of the computer for creative work. Hamilton cites American artist Bonnie Meltzer as an example:

With Painter Classic or PhotoShop I can draw directly into the computer. Instead of big pads of newsprint I can draw on any colour paper with the click of the paint bucket. Painter's tools simulate traditional art materials, and the Wacom pen is pressure sensitive so the lines and shapes are more like "real" drawings than you would think (Meltzer, in Hamilton, p.10).

As Hamilton points out, the computer can now be used to simulate pencil on paper, or brush on canvas. In this way new technology is directly applied to drawing, which is one of the oldest forms of communication.

My initial excursions into digital technology did not involve sophisticated programmes, and neither did I make use of a digital drawing tablet with a pressure sensitive pen. In contemporary terms, the tool I used (*Microsoft Paint*), is considered to be "dumb software". As a printmaker I tend to favour the relief process above others such as lithography, etching and screen-printing. Relief, the oldest of all print processes, may very well be regarded as the dumbest of the processes as it reduces everything to positive and negative shapes. Tonal and textural variation depends entirely on the artist's skill at manipulating the cutting process. Similarly in *Microsoft Paint* you are provided with a relatively limited range of options. I felt at home in this environment, and discovered that the limitations could become strengths.

I have subsequently acquired a digital drawing tablet, pressure sensitive pen, and more "intelligent" software. This tool has enabled me to produce work that, to quote Meltzer, looks 'more like "real" drawings than you would think' (In Hamilton, p. 10). The prints made from these virtual drawings look a lot like lithographic prints. It is only upon close inspection that you realize that they are digital prints.



Figure 4: John Roome, 2009. *Journey into the Ineffable*, Digital drawing (using a mouse and Microsoft Paint).

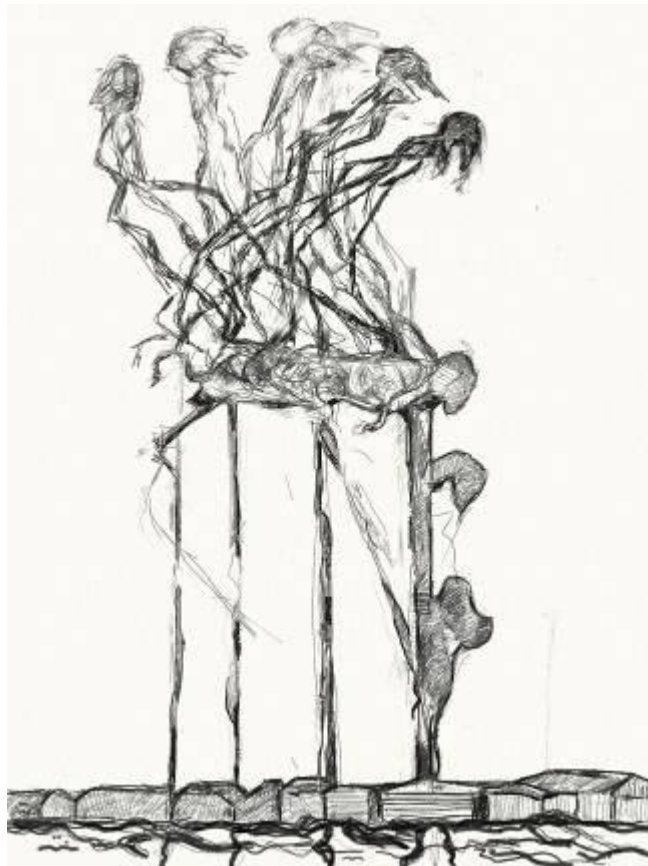


Figure 5: John Roome, 2010. *Harbouring Aliens*, Digital drawing (using digital drawing tablet).

Curiously, I have rather ambivalent feelings concerning this. Whilst I am more than satisfied with the ability of this tool to make sophisticated drawings, I feel that my creative thinking has not been challenged, stimulated and enhanced to the same extent as it was when using the dumber software. By using software that was not designed to simulate traditional art techniques, I was forced into a situation that required innovative thinking. Sophisticated software tends to make the computer invisible and allows one to work in an already established visual language. In most instances this may well be an advantage as it enables the artist to focus on the task at hand without having to learn a new language. The benefits of using the computer in this way are, as Meltzer points out, a saving of space, and materials. The actual creative process is not significantly altered.

The relationship between digital and traditional technology

In my work with *Microsoft Paint* I felt that I had entered into a far more challenging relationship between digital and traditional technology. If I had begun by using more sophisticated software I probably would never have come to the idea to translate the digital mark into a hand-carved mark and the resulting series of works may not have been made. Furthermore, my awareness of, and fascination with the pixilated quality of the digital image may not have come about if I had used a drawing tablet. In addition my experiments with making pixilated drawings by hand would also not have happened.

I am not saying that working with more sophisticated software is not useful, and I will continue to explore the possibilities offered. The idea of generating images by means of a computer that are then printed on paper using an inkjet printer, is not that far removed from the tradition of printmaking. The drawings made on a lithographic stone are also virtual and do not become physical until they have been printed on paper.

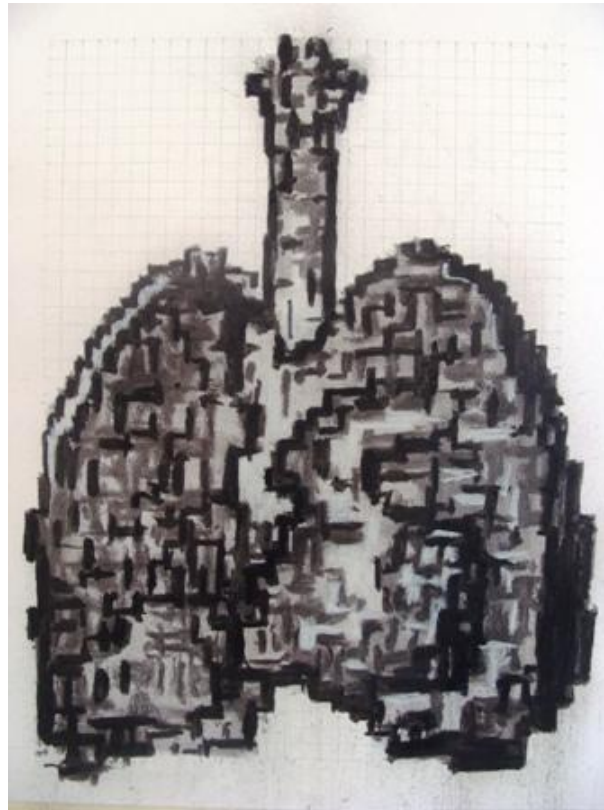


Figure 6: John Roome, 2009. *Black Lung*, Charcoal on paper.

What interests me, more than the ability of computers to simulate traditional techniques and processes, is their potential for creating a new way of looking and thinking. Hamilton refers to the 'paradigm shift' which is 'fundamentally a new way of looking at something' that has come about with digital technology. What Hamilton suggests is that 'it would seem appropriate to blend traditional with digital, increasing the creative capacity of printmaking' (p.11). In my work I combine traditional and digital processes with the aim of increasing my creative capacity as an artist.

I agree with Hamilton in his prediction that digital technology will become more sophisticated and will offer artists increasingly exciting possibilities. However, as he says, it does not automatically follow that traditional technology will become redundant. Particularly for artists like myself who grew up with traditional media, it is the possibility for 'cross fertilisation between traditional and digital platforms' that is exciting.

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