An Ongoing Visual Turn About Contemporary "Green Screen" Painting

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Abstract

The thesis investigates shifts in the styles and contexts of contemporary painting in the framework of screen media and digital culture, focusing on the concept of the "Green Screen" (Gronlund, 2016). This intangible vision is reflected in the growing number of artists from all over the world such as Trey Abdella (USA), Gao Hang (China), Eleanor Swordy (USA), Vojtěch Kovařík (Czech Republic), Ralf Kokke (Holland), Danica Lundy (Canada), Dan Coombs (UK) and others are making a range of painting-related work around digital imagery, internet-derived figures, marginalised picture archetypes, and low-quality online photography. First, I examine screen-based characteristics in my own painting practice. I attempt to use the concept of the "green screen" as a metaphor for the artist's invisible juxtaposition of violence-laden images and the flattening of the way they are created. The visual turn addresses a response of contemporary art to the technology of image dissemination, the algorithmic processing of large databases of dematerialised invisibility, which encompasses artists' fascination with and enthusiasm for what Hito Steyerl (2009) called as "poor image." In their repetitive appropriation and reinvestment of images, these contemporary painters challenge the traditional space of the data sublime and the decommodification of images through works that force the viewer to gaze into the abyss of low-quality images simulated in the frame.

Keywords: Contemporary Painting, Green Screen, Digital, Poor Image

Introduction

Before delving into the subject of my article, I think it's important to clarify my identity as a contemporary painter. My artistic journey began during my undergraduate years, and since then, my dedication to painting has remained unwavering. I have always felt a deep fascination with the medium and its potential. My practice is grounded in figurative painting, with the themes I explore often stemming from personal experiences, reflections on everyday life, and the appropriation of digital images that capture my attention.

Easel painting, as a medium, is both straightforward and complex. It involves manipulating tools to craft visual illusions on a flat surface, making it a unique form of visual production. The complexity of its historical development makes achieving innovation within contemporary painting particularly challenging, and this challenge is what draws me to the medium. Even before I officially began my research, I found myself questioning why I was consistently drawn to painting images derived from digital media. Initially, I thought this approach could represent a new direction for easel painting in the context of contemporary art. However, as I continued to explore, I began to recognize subtle, often overlooked factors influencing this tendency. I eventually discovered a group of contemporary artists who, like myself, incorporate digital screen imagery into their painting practices. This observation led me to realize that a significant shift in visual language was emerging in contemporary painting. As a result, I decided to focus my PhD research on exploring my own artistic practice, while also examining the work of these artists whose practices align with my own interests.

Through this article, I hope to explore the aforementioned visual shift, using a concrete phenomenological perspective, combined with my practical experience and visual analyses of the other related artists. The key term "Green Screen" comes from Melissa Gronlund. I use it to describe and metaphorically represent painters, including myself, who incorporate digital screen imagery. I first learned about this term from Melissa Gronlund's *Contemporary Art and Digital Culture*. Here, Gronlund explains how Green Screen technology originated in film practice and played a crucial role in post-production.[1] Green Screen technology thus symbolizes the organization and appropriation of different visual elements in moving images. It reflects the same infinite informative malleability as the artist's reinvestment of images mentioned above. "Green Screen," as a transitional concept, aptly connects my painting methods and those of the artists I am interested in with the digital characteristics of technology. In my subsequent research, I collectively refer to the paintings and artists I study as green-screen painting, green-screen artists.

The Diary of Practice

My research method firstly revolved around my practice diary, in which I dismantled the production process of each work into two parts: the draft stage and the completion stage. These two phases derive from the traditional work-process of painting, the basis for the majority of artists' experimentation. In each of these two phases, I noted and narrated my creative ideas, inspirations, alterations in consciousness and experiences as an autobiographical and self-reflective record. As a contemporary painter, the starting point of my research is rooted in my own painting practice. In the following, I will use an example

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[1] Melissa Gronlund, *Contemporary Art and Digital Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 44.
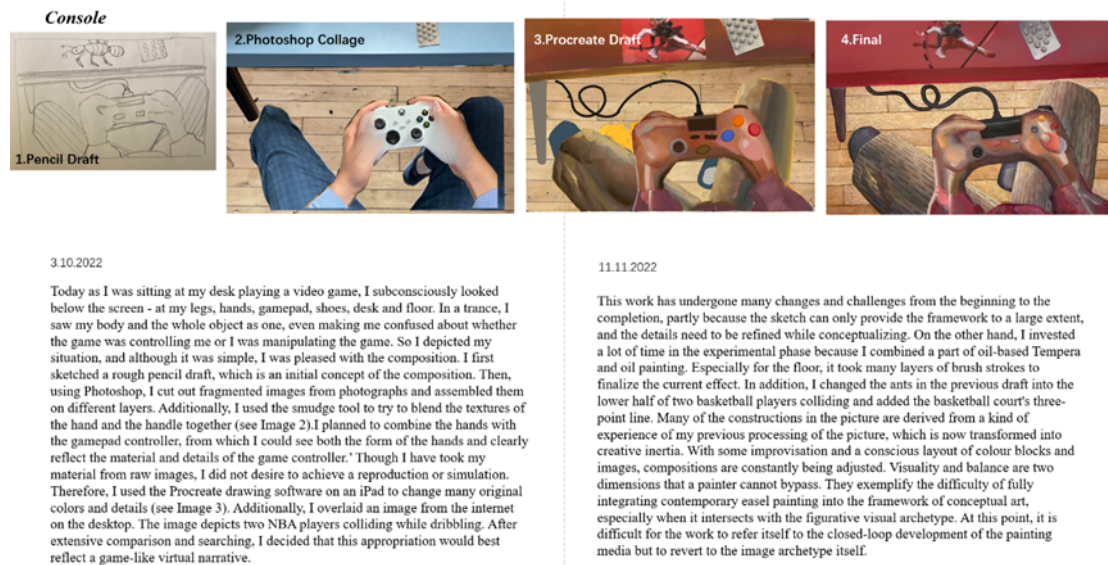
from my practice diary to illustrate how my painting reflects the visual qualities of digital screens.

I intersperse original images from my practice diary along with excerpts of text to describe the process step by step. After each description, I combine my existing experience and knowledge to conduct a preliminary analysis of the relevant information. Since I produced a large number of painting experiments during my doctoral studies, I only select parts of the diary that contain representative paintings for illustration. During the writing of the diary, I took on the identity of an artist and practitioner, whereas in the dissertation, I stand as a researcher and analyst, allowing me to objectively discuss my practice. In the following diary excerpts, I begin with one of the most representative paintings, *Console* (10/3/2022, Figure 1.1), as the opening narrative. As the explanation phase progresses, I elaborate on the main issues and ideas reflected upon during the practice process. (Text extracted from the practice diary appears in italics, like this, about the origin of *Console*.)

> Today as I was sitting at my desk playing a video game, I subconsciously looked below the screen - at my legs, hands, gamepad, shoes, desk and floor. In a trance, I saw my body and the whole object as one, even making me confused about whether the game was controlling me or I was manipulating the game. So I depicted my situation, and although it was simple, I was pleased with the composition. (Figure 1)

The description shows that my inspiration for the work derives from a real-life scenario; a type of feedback about a mundane state that I experienced. Now as a "me" who has stepped out of the process of making the work, and as a researcher trying to analyze the process of transforming the work from absence to presence, I can see that what I needed as a subject at that time was not the desire to reproduce an image of reality, but rather, what drove me to create was the feeling of inauthenticity brought about by the moment after interacting with the virtual reality of the game. Therefore, what I wanted to depict was not a simple reproduction, but moment of imagination and distortion based on reality. This is further validated in the subsequent entry, "*Though I have took my material from raw images, I did not desire to achieve a reproduction or simulation*". (Figure 1) This describes a metaphoric manipulation a series of random visual montages, originally unrelated image sources, easily labelled and applied into the composition of the picture at the sketching stage.

Figure 1: Haiyu Yuan, Practice Diary. p 11.

Console

1. Pencil Draft

2. Photoshop Collage

3. Procreate Draft

4. Final

3.10.2022

Today as I was sitting at my desk playing a video game, I subconsciously looked below the screen - at my legs, hands, gamepad, shoes, desk and floor. In a trance, I saw my body and the whole object as one, even making me confused about whether the game was controlling me or I was manipulating the game. So I depicted my situation, and although it was simple, I was pleased with the composition. I first sketched a rough pencil draft, which is an initial concept of the composition. Then, using Photoshop, I cut out fragmented images from photographs and assembled them on different layers. Additionally, I used the smudge tool to try to blend the textures of the hand and the handle together (see Image 2).I planned to combine the hands with the gamepad controller, from which I could see both the form of the hands and clearly reflect the material and details of the game controller.' Though I have took my material from raw images, I did not desire to achieve a reproduction or simulation. Therefore, I used the Procreate drawing software on an iPad to change many original colors and details (see Image 3). Additionally, I overlaid an image from the internet on the desktop. The image depicts two NBA players colliding while dribbling. After extensive comparison and searching, I decided that this appropriation would best reflect a game-like virtual narrative.

11.11.2022

This work has undergone many changes and challenges from the beginning to the completion, partly because the sketch can only provide the framework to a large extent, and the details need to be refined while conceptualizing. On the other hand, I invested a lot of time in the experimental phase because I combined a part of oil-based Tempera and oil painting. Especially for the floor, it took many layers of brush strokes to finalize the current effect. In addition, I changed the ants in the previous draft into the lower half of two basketball players colliding and added the basketball court's three-point line. Many of the constructions in the picture are derived from a kind of experience of my previous processing of the picture, which is now transformed into creative inertia. With some improvisation and a conscious layout of colour blocks and images, compositions are constantly being adjusted. Visuality and balance are two dimensions that a painter cannot bypass. They exemplify the difficulty of fully integrating contemporary easel painting into the framework of conceptual art, especially when it intersects with the figurative visual archetype. At this point, it is difficult for the work to refer itself to the closed-loop development of the painting media but to revert to the image archetype itself.

My diary continues:

> Then, using Photoshop, I cut out fragmented images from photographs and assembled them on different layers. Additionally, I used the smudge tool to try to blend the textures of the hand and the console together (see Image 2). I planned to combine the hands with the gamepad controller, from which I could see both the form of the hands and clearly reflect the material and details of the game controller. (Figure 1)

So, I used Photoshop to process the sketch of a vision I extracted, rather than directly transferring the sketch onto the canvas. I realized it would be challenging to organize the colours, materials, textures, and forms without any visual references. In order to avoid recreating my vision based on a realistic image, in Photoshop I could piece together a state of multiple juxtaposed image fragments. In my thought, all specific reference images were independent modules, participating in the overall planning in their respective layers, rather than being placed in the same environment from the start. I used the smudge tool to intervene in the process of image deformation, to experiment with a visual image that merges the hand and the console. Reflecting on this process, I was surprised to find that I was thinking about the elements in the image through Photoshop's montage-like operation mode. During this process, these elements were merely manipulable and replaceable images to me. In addition to this, the original colours palette of the image sources also shows a state of separation in the final effect.

> Therefore, I used the Procreate drawing software on an iPad to change many original colours and details (see Image 3). (Figure 1)

This means that colour is stripped away from the inherent properties of the image original sources and turned into an unstable medium. After processing in Photoshop, I was not satisfied with the visual representation based on photo collages. I used another digital application, Procreate, to further shape the colours, textures, and details in the image to match my imagination. Procreate enables easy modifications and refinements, less experimental

steps compared to directly working on the canvas. In most of my other works, I use these digital painting tools first to build mechanisms for modification and experimentation by adding layers.

> This work has undergone many changes and challenges from the beginning to the completion, partly because the sketch can only provide the framework to a large extent, and the details need to be refined while conceptualizing. (Figure 1)

The first sentence of the finished record section reflects on the fact that the reality of image references can only provide a limited value, in contrast to the unlimited number of creative options available. If an artist needs to follow a conceptual methodology for the configuration of his or her work, then my practice traces its origins to the appropriation of the contemporary screen, the original source of the images; how they are appropriated and made malleable is the focus of my attention. I think this must be related to some specific plane of appropriation, or at least to virtual experience and digital simulation, because my subsequent records I tried to replace the image of the ants planned in the sketch with the lower bodies of two basketball players in motion and the three-point line of the court. This image came from social media, and I modified it from its original size in some nodes of transmission and gradually reduced its original resolution in the process of compression. If you look back at my other work, low-quality images like this appear quite often.

In my painting practice, I choose tempera as one of my techniques. This decision is a result of careful consideration. Tempera is a classical painting technique that was widely used by European artists up toward during the early Renaissance. Tempera invokes mixing of pigment powder with binders such as egg yolk, egg white, or plant oils. Tempera dries extremely quickly and enables the layering of different colours, resulting in a delicate texture of brushstrokes. These characteristics differ significantly from the visual experience offered by screens. My first encounter with tempera as a medium occurred during my undergraduate studies when I came across paintings by artist Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009, US). I was captivated by the texture of his paintings, which led me to begin researching and learning this technique. Tempera conveys a dimension of materiality and substance in my painting practice. Many contemporary artists, aiming to visually simulate screens, often use airbrushes and large, soft brushes to minimize the impact of visible brushstrokes. Screen images, by contrast, are almost entirely dematerialized, displaying smooth and non-artificial textures. I persist in using tempera as a painting technique because I think that an artist's simulation and appropriation of screen images can coexist with the emphasis on the material texture of painting. Additionally, I argue that the screen aesthetic in easel painting is primarily reflected in the artist's approach to digital imagery, their methods of appropriation, and their working processes. Particularly after examining the works of artists such as Issy Wood (1993-, US) (Figure 2), Paul Robas (1989-, Romania) (Figure 3), and Jordan Kasey (1985-, US) (Figure 4), I became even more convinced of my perspective. Painting technique is a means to serve an aesthetic commonality; it can be different, unique, homogenised or suppressed, but it must be chosen and cultivated for some purpose of the individual artist. I observed that these artists, in various ways, focus on obvious brushstroke textures in their paintings. But I can still discern the screen-based compositional methods reflected in their works. I consider that the simulation and appropriation of the visual form of digital interfaces is one of the most profound influences on my painting practice. It enables me to move away from a world constructed on the basis of nature and reality, giving rise to a series of new viewing modes and visual organizations.

According to my practice diary, questions that arose I need to pursue here: What kind of visual culture and aesthetic experience can we use to proxy our relationship with internet-derived creations? I draw on theories of visual culture in the ensuing discourse to discuss this visual turn, widely present in contemporary painting.

Figure 2: Issy Wood, *Plunging Neckline With Animals*, 2020, Oil on Linen, 23.5×30 cm
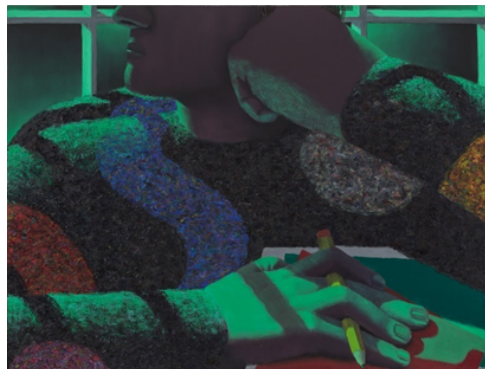

(Artwork © Issy Wood, photo provided by X Museum, Shanghai)

Figure 3: Paul Robas, *Waiting Room*, 2024, Acrylic on Canvas, 30.5×40×2 cm

(Artwork © Paul Robas, provided by Galerie)

Figure 4: Jordan Kasey, *Green Light*, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 144×192 cm

(Artwork © Jordan Kasey, provided by Nicelle Beauchene Gallery)

The Green-Screen Artists

In the course of my explorations, I noticed a group of contemporary artists in a similar situation to mine. I became aware of and interested in them during my MA studies. Initially, I noticed that some of my classmates in the painting department shared my habit of appropriating images, and later I realized that many artists from around the world are guiding images into a pursuit of an interesting and flat aesthetic through image appropriation. Most of them are first and foremost engaged in the field of contemporary figurative painting, and most of them were born in the 80s and 90s, which means that their growth was accompanied by the unprecedented development of the screen image and the Internet medium. The most important aspect stems from the fact that their work is associated with Collage and Montage and can be seen as a contemporary cast or reflection of virtual space and time. This is reflected in the fact that these artists share the same passion as I do for appropriating marginalized imagery. For example, I am very interested in Gabriel Secchin (1989-, Brazil), Matija Bobičić (1987-, Slovenia), Issy Wood (1993-, USA), Lin Cong (1984, China), Eleanor Swordy (1987-, USA), Danica Lundy (1991-, Canada), and Ralf Kokke (1989-, Netherlands), etc. (Figure 5).

Figure 5: The Green-Screen Artists

Matija Bobičić-1987
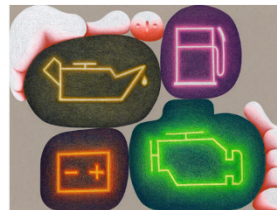The Shopper, 2021
acrylic and charcoal on canvas,
100cm x 90cm

ISSY WOOD-1993
The scratch, 2019
oil on linen
9.25 x 11.75 inches

LIN CONG-1984
The object
Acrylic board oil paint, 2019
40cm×50cm

Gabriel Secchin-1989
Action Lekking, 2017
óleo e carvão sobre linho
32cm x 32 cm

Eleanor Swordy-1987
Checking the engine, 2021
Crayon on paper,
18cm x 24cm

Danica Lundy
Ignition, 2021,
Oil on panel,
16 x 12 in

In fact, I needed an objective analysis using visual theory, to explain to myself why these artists share a high degree of similarity with my creative experience. My initial criteria for judgement of my practice and potential research objects emerged from intuition, developed over a long period as a painter. Sometime after my research began, as more information I gathered, I found more and more such artists with some pertinence to my creative process, which forced me to move from a relatively isolated exploration to confronting the potentially huge visual trends of the moment. This also means that the overall direction of my research, with the collection of more external data, has gradually deviated from the originally established heuristic research's fundamental self-referential framework. Now these artists I intersperse as my research subjects active with uncertainty. They represent a variety of different artistic stylistic tendencies. I do not want to crystallise them into one unit, especially since they come from almost all over the world rather than from a certain region. Therefore, instead of labelling them as a movement, it is better to perceive them as an evolving state of

affairs, in which we can look for broadly related characteristics and commonalities, and locate the artists in the context of a cybernetic network system in the digital age, where globalized cultural exports and hybridization have led to shared distinctive characteristics of their art that go beyond their regional identities.

Art critic Melissa Gronlund discusses the green-screen technology in contemporary digital art as a category, which both represents a core production method in the film industry, and illuminates aspects of immateriality and invisibility in contemporary art. Gronlund writes about how Hito Steyerl applied Green Screen technology to her video work *How Not to Be Seen*, She comments that "I want to focus on this last emblem, that of the Green Screen, which has become a signal motif of art responding to digital technologies, to further demonstrate how visualization has become a sign of anxiety, representing images not as stable entities but as in perpetual motion."[2] From the technical point of view, Green Screen in film-making is used to integrate two sets of images through the technique of "swimming matte". Gronlund's point is that this process reflects the infinite plasticity of visual information in the same way as the artist's treatment of images mentioned above.

In contemporary video production, Green Screen technology is frequently combined with CGI to create immersive visual effects. Actors perform against a Green Screen backdrop, which is subsequently replaced with virtual environments or enhanced with additional CGI effects. In my research, although Green Screen and CGI are distinct technologies, I often consider their combined potential to generate, manipulate, or modify images when discussing the influence of Green Screen on contemporary painting. Within such works, whether moving or painted, all elements undergo a secularization and flattening during the integration process. This approach moves away from depicting natural, cohesive events or scenes, instead favoring the extraction and assembly of visual materials from fragmented images. The montage of these images bridges the mesh-like connection between fantasy and reality in an instant, while dismantling traditional narrative requirements, leaving only the visual impact of compositional arrangement. I propose using "Green Screen" as a metaphor to draw parallels with certain innovative aspects of contemporary painting. These include the simulation and filtering processes inspired by post-Internet image culture, as well as the layer-based creation methods reminiscent of Photoshop's workflow. This analogy highlights how contemporary painting adopts techniques akin to those used in digital media, reflecting the layered and constructed nature of both mediums.

As I attempted to dissect my own creative motivations and those of the artists involved, I realized that we work in a way that is almost indistinguishable from the director of a Hollywood special effects film. Perhaps through the organizational layers of some paintings, audiences can tangibly feel that artists use the canvas as a Green Screen space for generating and appropriating original images. What I want to point out is that the process of splicing and stitching different images often creates a kind of seam, which serves as an indicator for the audience to recognize the extent to which an image is artificially manipulated. The goal of Green Screen technology in film production is to bridge and minimize such seams, thereby more easily immersing the audience in simulated realities, such as in the movie *Jurassic Park* (dir. Steven Allan Spielberg, 1993). On the other hand, Green-screen artists often deliberately preserve or even expose this seam, allowing audiences to instantly discern the non-natural aspects and the difference between the painted representation and real space.

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[2] Melissa Gronlund, *Contemporary Art and Digital Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 46.

However, the "distraction" approach is only an attitude adopted by the artists between the deconstruction and construction of source of the images, and it does not directly lead to the generation of "Poor" Image. This phrase was coined in 2012 by Hito Steyerl:

> The Poor Image reveals much more than just the content and appearance of the image itself; it also reveals the marginalisation of the original image and the gathering of social forces that lead to its circulation as a bad image on the Internet. Poor images are poor images because they do not carry any of the values of the image class society - their illegitimate and inferior status exempts them from this standard of evaluation. The lack of resolution corroborates that they are appropriated and displaced.

The direct link to the "Poor" Image lies in the artists' modes of choice and motivation, a concentration of their aesthetic experience and visual focus. As a "member" of the green-screen artists, I admit that I don't want my images to carry too many universal values and mainstream intention. I try to filter out any value structures and iconic signifiers that the imagery carried in their original contexts. Firstly, I think that marginalized and unstable imagery possess better contemporaneity and experimental potential compared to mainstream, polished imagery. In the simulation and appropriation of "poor images," unexpected visual effects often emerge, making them far more intriguing and challenging than Pop Art's engagement with popular imagery. Additionally, poor-quality and marginalized images carry a deconstructive power against grand narratives during their dissemination and reproduction processes. Both visually and conceptually, I find "poor images" to be more interesting and effective.

Green-screen artists seemed to be carrying out the same plan. Regardless of their geographic location, they are unanimous in their selection of the "poor Image."

Artforum as an international monthly publication focused on contemporary art, renowned for its in-depth analysis and critiques of visual art. I found numerous references link to green-screen painting on this platform, particularly in articles about individual artists. For example, an article discussing the paintings (Figure 6) of artist Louisa Gagliardi (1989-, Switzerland), writes:

> The exhibition included eight works, all with similarly alienating and unreal imagery of coalescing inner and outer landscapes. Gagliardi creates her paintings directly in Photoshop. […] I still wondered, though, whether what I saw could have resulted from her having lost control over the medium in any way. […] The final images often seem 'unreal,' inducing dizziness and vertigo and the vague sensation that one's eyes hurt as they do after one has been staring at a screen all day. […] Stylistically, these works show affinities with those of some of Moscow's late-Soviet-era nonconformist painters, such as Erik Bulatov, Ilya Kabakov, and, most of all, Oleg Tselkov. Their ironic art reflected the disruption and atrophy behind the late Soviet empire's image of itself. In scratching at the surface of late capitalism's self-image, Gagliardi shows herself to be similarly perceptive. When you dig beneath the surface, you find only more surface.[3]

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[3] Julieta Aranda, "Louisa Gagliardi," *Artforum*, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, accessed June 22, 2024, https://www.artforum.com/events/louisa-gagliardi-247149/

In my opinion, Louisa Gagliardi is a typical green-screen artist known for transporting and intricately editing online images in her creations. Artforum's article by Agata Pyzik provides a critical review of Gagliardi's painting. Pyzik writes the Photoshop-like surreal and curated landscapes of Gagliardi's painting. She subtly questioning the overuse of screen media and the physical discomfort induced by such "screen-like" visual effects. But at the end of this article, Pyzik concludes by acknowledging Gagliardi's disruptive exploration of self-image in late capitalism through her painting concepts.

Figure 6: Louisa Gagliardi, *Apples and Oranges*, 2020, Ink and Gel Medium on PVC, 70 7⁄8×44 1⁄8 Inches

(Artwork © Louisa Gagliardi, details provided by Artforum)

The Artforum article that truly caught my attention was about artist Robin F. Williams. The content both dissects her work and poses critical challenges to the visual core of her pieces. Notably, the article mentions "zombie figuration" twice, emphasizing this concept in William's art. It writes:

> The 'zombie figuration' wave never really washed over Mexico City. Even when flirting with the figure, our painters remain for the most part highly conceptual, and painting that is colourful, figurative, expressive, and done in large format remains a scarce presence in the local landscape. All of this is to say that Robin F. Williams's first solo show in Mexico City, 'Watch Yourself,' was a unique and welcome occasion. […] Tears on Screen is simply hypnotic, magical in the sense of involving implausible optical deception and visual trickery. It almost makes me wish I hadn't seen the magician's secrets revealed on her TikTok account. In any case, this unique approach to painting drew an impressive number of visitors to the show, with a healthy turnout

of local artists and art students as well. The regurgitative staples of zombie figuration are products meant to be digested in mere seconds. Williams offers something different. Failing to spend some time inspecting the craft and skill invested in her paintings, their virtuoso if completely wacky construction—would not only be a big miss but would also make you a bit of a snob, and who would want to be one of those?

The term "zombie figuration" refers to the "Zombie Formalism" in modern painting, typically used to criticize works that fall into kitsch and banal formalism, lacking the substance and conceptual depth of idea-based painting. The author's critique seems to reflect the limitations of screen-based painting in terms of aesthetics. To some extent, it leads painting to become superficial and formalistic, neglecting the shaping of core concepts and meanings within the artwork.

Figure 7: Robin F. Williams, *Tears on Screen*, 2023, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 7×11 Feet

(Artwork © Robin F. Williams, details provided by Artforum)

Conclusion

From the perspective of a practitioner, I think the true value of painting lies in its capacity to "reveal" rather than "impose." The green-screen mode, in contrast, emphasizes the act of "imposing," highlighting a series of tightly controlled actions by the artist, from selecting to appropriating imagery. In the context of screen-based viewing, the visual representation of an image is often perceived as the complete essence of its corresponding reality. At this point, easel painting loses, to some extent, its resistance to formalism and diminishes the expression of materiality. In my view, painting practices in the digital media age are at risk of falling into an artificial space controlled by capital and technology. This space is incapable of generating authentic, "embodied" forms that differ fundamentally from its inherent nature. Within this framework, image processing may appear distinct, yet it shares a commonality that undermines the unique qualities of the medium. The spontaneity, materiality, and singularity of traditional painting are increasingly overshadowed by the economic values that shape the production and exchange of images.

Whether we embrace or resist the aesthetic system of control dominated by digital screens, it has infiltrated every aspect of contemporary visual creation. The primary goal of my research is to critically examine this visual transformation from the standpoint of contemporary

painting, seeking to uncover the underlying systems of image control and technological networks. Ultimately, I aim to stress that the green-screen is not simply a visual trend limited to the canvas; it represents an actor-network shaped by consumer society, culture, and technology. This network involves not only artists but also all consumers of digital screen imagery.

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