

Digital Abstraction, by Allen Schill

This is a selection of a new group of works created by various means, but always involving some digital elaboration in an image editor (Adobe Photoshop). Their sources are always in some way photographic – either digital files of photographs that may be film or digital in origin, or scans which are digital.

Some come from a close examination of pixel patterns in undetailed areas of photographic images, and consist essentially of these areas, enlarged to the point where the pixels are prominent (e.g. “Night Vision”). In some cases such patterns are superimposed on themselves, slightly out of register, creating secondary forms, as in “Relief”. Some (whose pixels are *not* prominent), are carefully planned and executed, like “Willie Flips”, while others are the result of some fluke of visualization in the computer (e.g., “Light Music”). Another still (“Nori II”) is not so elaborated, mainly retouched and heightened in contrast, and might belong as well with the scanned images.

All share a strong emphasis on pattern and repetition, which have always been important themes for me. To some extent the ideas came to me while working with images in Photoshop or in an image browser or in Extensis Portfolio, a program for managing a database of images. In Photoshop I often enlarge the image much bigger than actual pixel size (when each pixel in the image is represented by one pixel on the screen). At 200% and above the pixels are always more noticeable. At intermediate enlargements the program generates, by dithering, a visualization with certain irregularities to simulate the file at that magnification. The more uniform the image in the file, or rather the more gradual or smooth the shading in an area, the more unpredictable are the dithering patterns created to represent it.

I was often struck by the beauty of these patterns that seemed random at this scale, but were purely photographic in origin and modified in a way that was determined solely by the computer (depending on a degree of enlargement I established). When I saw something I liked, I made a screen shot, which later might become the basis for an image. In some cases I made large series of enlargements to see and record these visualizations. Likewise in Extensis Portfolio: occasionally when I scrolled the display would create an intense diagonal pattern composed of repetitions, out of phase, of what I should have seen, like a badly tuned TV.

Clearly one can produce vast quantities of virtual material using these partly arbitrary means. Raw material is as good as infinite. One is only limited by one’s imagination, by one’s capacity in digital elaboration, and by one’s appetite, which is essentially a sense of proportion about how much is worthwhile. Without a rigorous sense of judgment, there is the risk of the activity becoming little more than repetitious play, almost a habit.

In the transition from analog to digital photography there are many, myself included, who have lamented the passing of the beautifully random, homogeneous grain of traditional film, like particles of sand. They hated to think of their images as being composed of millions of tiny squares, all lined up in a perfect grid, even though this is virtually imperceptible at the usual sizes. And while I still have a special fondness for film grain and the old analog processes, I have come to appreciate the grid of digital photography, whose images, seen close-up, have a grain-like quality of their own.

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December 2009

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