

(At the end of the text are links to the relevant parts of the website.)

Scanned Images, by Allen Schill

I got a scanner about ten years ago mainly to make scans of the large transparencies and negatives of my view camera photography. The scanner is designed for scanning these as well as reflective art up to the size of a standard page. I quickly became involved in making experimental scans of things not ordinarily scanned – toys, vegetation, small objects of plastic or glass, coins and banknotes, different kinds of paper and other materials. Like every other means of making an image – e.g., view camera as opposed to 35mm reflex as opposed to pinhole camera or toy camera, etc. – scanning affords a unique approach and helps generate ideas in ways that other approaches do not. This is not to say that the means determines the outcome, but that it influences the choices by restricting the possibilities.

My work with scans has grown out of the subjects and themes that have always fascinated me, as a person no less than as a visual artist. A major part is concerned with pattern and texture. In these my tendency is to produce more or less homogeneous textural images which fill the composition and have no background. Another part, closely related, is concerned with nature or structures in nature – in these I generally scan an object in its entirety, with the background showing. Another still is concerned with small objects whose concentrated appeal is usually overlooked; these also are usually scanned in their entirety. (These categories are a bit too neat; in reality things are not so simple.)

Their subjects are all generally recognizable, with the big exception of the textural images, which often are seen in such a way as to make this difficult. Others would be recognizable except that they are presented out of any context that would allow immediate recognition. I do enjoy the aspect of surprise in the apprehension of an image – one of our main expectations in viewing photography is that we will recognize what we see, and I like to confound that expectation when I can, hoping to make the viewer see the image as a pure abstraction. The vast majority are called “Untitled” and should be considered as such, and seen without regard to what they are, even though usually the subject is given in parentheses. It is never *about* guessing what these things are, even though nothing is wrong with the pleasure one might take in this. On the contrary, I hope usually that I’ve managed to create something quite new, quite apart from the subject itself. (I would suggest that when viewing you avoid reading the titles.)

The images of natural objects and of many of the small objects are probably the most accessible in that they are pleasing to most people, or at least people with relatively conventional expectations of art. It’s easy to appreciate the beauty of a leaf or a small toy, while the enlarged texture of a piece of foam rubber may not appeal to so many. The textural images, especially the most uniform, are rather minimalist and require a rarified kind of taste. Some of them approach being pictures of nothing, which is exactly what I wanted. The most extreme of these I have generally avoided putting on the web because they are impossible to appreciate; with the less extreme, one must imagine a very finely-detailed image. When appropriate I have provided a detail considerably enlarged with respect to the image of the whole; in a few cases I have omitted the whole and put only a detail on the web page.

The compositional approach with patterns and texture and with small objects and materials is quite simple. An object is scanned, and sometimes cropped to eliminate the background, or just to a desired area. Most of them are straight or unmanipulated digitally except for adjustment of tonality or overall color balance. An exception is an example of a series in which I scanned a piece of ordinary graph paper and then digitally imposed all various visual distortions on it. They are essentially visual works, although in certain ones there is a noticeable conceptual element, such as “Untitled (Printer Pattern)” or “Untitled (Number Pattern)”.

The compositional approach with natural materials is also very straightforward. Things may be arranged more or less uniformly to fill the composition, sometimes randomly (as in the case of the fluffy seeds) and sometimes very carefully arranged, possibly in one or more rows (such as the sprigs, the dried poppies or the pope’s medals). Sometimes what may appear random is quite the opposite, the result of some rather fanatical precision, as with the red pollynoses. Or else a single object may be positioned centrally (like the feather), or a single

subject scanned and then cropped to eliminate any background (e.g., the leeks).

Occasionally I've done something a little out of these usual schemes, such as "Gradient (Rose Hips II)," in which I actually took the trouble to arrange a few hundred rose hips according to color, from dark to light. (In this I give a nod to Nils Udo, an outstanding artist and a true master – practically the inventor – of "arranged nature" photography.) Another special case, as with the "Berries I and XXI" has been to scan the same objects, unmoved, many times over the course of many days, as they slowly desiccated. Seen in sequence, these 21 very similar still images become an animation. On other occasions in the past I've done still-life series of the same subject altered through time, by drying or thawing. (Though it was not my inspiration, a marvelous and far more ambitious work, "Vanitas" by Sam Taylor-Wood, is a video exercise in time-lapse photography that I've seen a few years ago. It last about ten minutes and shows a big dish of fruit as it decomposes *to dust* over the course of many weeks.)

Historical Background and Technical Considerations

Scanning's immediate antecedent is probably the photocopy machine art practiced by many experimental artists starting a few decades ago, especially with the advent of the color copier and copiers that could render continuous-tone images (like photographic film and paper), rather than just the high-contrast black-on-white of typewritten text. Though technically still a bit crude, copier art was noted for its spontaneity – cheap and easy – and its favoring of collage techniques. It was limited in size to the format of the copier, unfortunately, and technically by its use of toners and color dyes which are inherently less stable than the pigments and inks that painters and printmakers generally use. (Some artists used transfer methods in which solvents were used to transfer the image to a sheet of high-quality artist's paper. This at least provided a stable support for the image, although it didn't increase the longevity of the dyes.)

Scanning is not limited in these respects. Once an image is obtained, it can be digitally manipulated for color, tonality, contrast, and the like. It can also be printed in many ways, including digital pigment prints which are expected to stay in good condition for centuries, to any size desired up to the limits imposed by the resolution of the scanner. My own scanner – which is not the latest or the greatest – can make a scan at 400% (4x original size) at 300dpi without interpolation. This means that a scan whose original size is 21x30 cm can provide a file that is 84 x120 cm. at 300 dpi, respecting the 300 dpi convention for high-quality images. (One could dare to go bigger.) (Up to 400%, the pixels are all true, scanned pixels; it could go to 800% but without a true increase in resolution.)

The scanner will produce a sharp image of whatever lies directly on the glass, but its depth of field – that is, zone of sharp focus – extends only two or three millimeters from the glass before the image gets noticeably out of focus. In practice this means that although the scanner is adapted for flat surfaces, it is possible to make effective images of some three-dimensional objects (see the "Three Sprigs" and the "Cavolfiore Romano"). Sometimes the soft-focus zone works aesthetically and seems as natural as that of a photograph with a shallow depth of field. The light of the scanner gives a uniform backlighting when scanning in transparency mode (transmitted light). In reflective mode, it provides a bright but soft illumination with highlights towards the upper end of the scanned area and shadows towards the lower. It is impossible to control but works very well with some subjects, giving a modeled light that is not unlike what you would get from a photo studio light with a tent of light-diffusing material.

Allen Schill
December 2009

© 2010 Allen Schill. All rights reserved in all countries. No part of this document may be reproduced or used in any form without prior written permission from the author.

Scanned Images - Pattern and Texture:
Scans of Small Objects and Materials:
Scans of Natural Materials

<http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S2c>
<http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S2d>
<http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S2e>