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From Hand to Mouse: Can we value computer art as we value fine art?

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By Shelley Frost

Wanted: Artists who can draw stuff by hand really well. No Illustrator, Photoshop or other program experience – just really great drawing skills. That’s it. Drawing. By hand.

There aren’t many job listings like this in the LA Times classifieds. But check under the Gs. Graphic designers, along with CAAD/CAM-savvy architects, engineers and 3D animators, are the most sought after – and highest paid – stars of today’s creative job market, a market that rewards an increasing reliance on technology.

All good artists know how to draw well, but the most talented illustrator won’t get paid as much for simply drawing by hand as he would if he went digital. The drive for efficiency and the perfect digital stroke, the hunger of the mass market and the cult of commercial deadlines have changed everything.

Is it a bad thing that art-by-hand doesn’t seem to be valued for its own sake in professional industry anymore, as it was before computer-aided capabilities took center stage? It depends on whether or not you’re afraid we’ll lose the connection with craft that engages participants in a vibrant, sensory tradition. A work wrought by hand is, in essence, a superior art form. Creating something by hand is a multi-dimensional, demanding process, from concept to execution. It involves the dirtying of hands, a dialogue with pencil, paper and paint. Computer art, employing keyboard and mouse, seems to skip a certain dimension of tactile interactivity. Clearly, both processes call for creativity and skills. Both require education to master a range of techniques. And many computer artists first render the work by hand, or vice versa, using the computer to plan their work. But looking at both approaches as two different means to their respective ends, most would agree that there’s something transcendent that grants the “fine” to fine art.

It is heartening that art schools still continue to place drawing skills at the top of their lists of prerequisites, regardless of whether students are applying to Graphic Design or Ceramics. But somewhere between graduation and the want ads, drawing seems to cease being coveted for its own sake. After school, most classically trained artists find they must abandon their focus on traditional craft, at least professionally.

After graduating with a degree in art, and having come to the conclusion he wouldn't necessarily make a living as a painter, South Bay graphic designer Kris Gaines took a job as a fledgling computer artist.

He says the transition to the commercial world was a little frustrating, in that he had to accept that his art was now serving someone other than himself.

"My boss was always reminding me I wasn't designing for myself," he says. "I was designing for the mass market."

Switching to the computer was definitely part of his adjustment. "But once I got used to it," says Gaines, "I enjoyed it. It's a tool, and can only do what the person behind it is telling it to do. So, you're still being creative. But it's not like your hands are getting dirty, or working with a live model, with paint."

Gaines says he regrets he hasn't painted in a while, but a recent gallery visit might have inspired him to reconnect with his longtime passion.

Do we deny our artistic souls when we value – give our attention, money and accolades to – computer art over traditional craft in the commercial world?

A debate brews among commercial graphic artists about where and how to find meaning in their work. For all its economic opportunity, the discipline itself seems to be having a mid-lifecycle crisis. It's almost as if graphic artists are pausing to blink at the empty canvases in their garages, and realizing they have lost touch with their fine art roots. And rather than go back to the fine art media, these graphic artists are wondering whether they can reach the sublime in their new field.

This discussion has been visible in *Émigré*, a magazine that explores issues within the graphic design industry. After the magazine published a manifesto calling for a higher purpose in graphic design, Loretta Staples from University of Michigan School of Art and Design, in a letter to the editor, called upon the ranks to "take a close, hard look at the cultural location of your own work... Set out in uncharted territory. But if you do, if you really do, something tells me you'll no longer recognize what you're doing as design."

The manifesto drew another response from Tom Elsner and Hilla Neske of Artificial Environments in London. They called for a reconnection with some other kind of inner spark that isn't being drawn upon:

"The omnipresence of design is not due to its inherent potential, but rather lent it by the powerful machinations of advertising and marketing... The definition of design will never be changed by individuals turning away from the discipline, but rather the choices and negotiations they enter into when creating commercial art. It is our belief that only by injecting milligrams of what we hold at heart into the very mainstream of popular culture is there any real hope of changing it into something else."

Most artists, regardless of discipline, value the search for meaning. Purist philosophies notwithstanding, traditionalists should not automatically disparage those who go commercial. Some commercial artists and their employers do remain grounded in the fine arts.

Bob Hoffman, a spokesman for Digital Domain (DD), an Academy Award winning digital studio in Santa Monica, offers some insight into one place where computer art is indeed the business, but where the players constantly pay homage to the fine art aesthetic.

"This company looks for traditional skills before going any further," Hoffman says. "The artists we look for who do computer graphics – we look primarily at their artistic abilities in drawing."

Hoffman says the team at DD is always grounding what they do in traditional, observational art. "The tool becomes secondary," he says. "It becomes all about the eye of the artist. The question becomes, 'How do you see the world and perceive the world?'"

"If you go to the homes of some of our artists, some of the most sophisticated digital artists in the world, you'll find their original paintings and drawings all over the house. The same aesthetics they learned in art school are the absolute criteria for being able to work here in the artists group. There are others here with simply digital and comp-sci backgrounds, of course, but in the artists' group, they're being paid for their fine art aesthetic."

And what about the interaction with the pencil and paper, the dirtying of hands, which renders the traditional craft something else entirely?

"These are invaluable, to a point," says Hoffman. "But we have just as much appreciation for traditional art as anyone else does, and have an appreciation for this (digital art) as well."

Betty Edwards, the author of *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, has world-renown expertise in the creative process and also, we found, a deep appreciation for technology and the art that can be created with it.

"I think it's a long leap for most people to think that classical art skills can help in this computer age," she says. "It just seems unlikely. They focus on the technology and accept all the canned stuff, and can't make that connection. Oddly, the highest people in the field – and I know some geniuses – think quite the opposite."

"I think the problem is with computer designers, coming out of school with no basic foundation in drawing. The reliance on computer clip-art is deadly. Anyone who wants to go into this area needs to have skills in drawing and some experience with aesthetics. There's a lot of bad stuff out there. I think what happens is they think that if they add one more font or bright color, they'll put it all together. It is getting better, I've noticed. Then there are the computer games – like 'Myst,' which is quite beautiful to look at, and quite baffling to try and play."

So what if artists want to make a living drawing – and only drawing? The options are limited. They can teach, and if they're really good, they can sell their work.

"You have to follow your passion and your venue," says Hoffman. "Technology is a reality of this commercial environment, and digital production technique and post-production technique are absolutely integrated and in demand. It's a commercial environment, not just a non-traditional environment.

"I don't recommend it for a lot of artists. I think it's to be admired that artists want to maintain that integrity. But there's certainly a lot of integrity with the artists who choose to use their skills in this commercial environment, as well. I don't think either has to diminish the other's contribution."

Whatever we value, and wherever technology takes us, the most respected in the field seem to agree that we can't lose touch with the fine arts. We can't disengage ourselves from the fine arts creative process – the hands-on involvement that draws upon centuries of mastery and tradition.

Will art-by-hand go the way of handwriting? Will commercial computer art render traditional craft obsolete, as email has rendered letters written in ink? Not if we value the means of the creation as we value the results.