The Repurpose of Life

Gary Singh

Stanley Bowman has spent half a century repurposing one thing for another. He finished an architecture degree in 1963 and then worked professionally in the field before going back to school and getting an MFA in photography. Then, in the ‘80s, while halfway through a 30-year run as a Cornell University photography professor, Bowman began experimenting with graphics software.

Like many creative types, he was looking for technology that didn’t exist yet. He recalls being in the darkroom at Cornell, looking at a photo of a person and wishing there was a way to take the person’s arm from down by his side and turn it so that the arm could raise up in the air. He was anticipating Photoshop before that program ever emerged.

“I started looking all across the Cornell campus for people exploring the use of computers, looking specifically for some insight about using the computer to create and manipulate photographic images,” Bowman recalls, adding that some of the people he spoke with even went so far as to say that photographs would never be digitizable.

“It is hard to imagine someone having said that then, but that was the state of the technology at that time,” he says.

Eventually, the TGA (Truevision Graphics Adapter) file format came along with the related capture board, and Truevision loaned one to Cornell, along with its TIPS (Truevision Image Paint System) software. Bowman worked with TPS until Photoshop came along in the early ‘90s.

“I would describe myself as an explorer of new technology, always looking for new ways to recreate and represent photographic and digital imagery,” Bowman says. “During the ‘50s through ‘80s, my world was the analog world of camera, darkroom, chemicals, and silver-based film and papers. But then with the advent of computer and digital technology, all that changed, and so did my way of working.”

Pixel Penchant

One particular advantage of working purely in the digital world is that software lets you zoom in much farther than any equivalent in the analog realm. In Bowman’s case, he zooms in ridiculously far, so much that curiosity reigns free, experimentation takes over, and brand-new images emerge. He repurposes pixelation to entirely new heights.

The cover image, Counter Slope, combines several images Bowman created in 2008 and edited in Photoshop. After digitally scanning an abstract painting on glass, he isolated a small section of the painting and zoomed in to the point where he could see the actual pixel squares—normally a technique you would shy away from. But at that point, Bowman realized he could begin to rearrange the pixel squares as if they were new dimensions of raw material.

“As a last step I selected some of the pixel squares and pasted into them pieces of the original painting at actual size,” Bowman explains. “So, a viewer might look more closely at squares and discover pieces of the original painting.”

Bush Pres (see Figure 1) is the result of a similar process. Zooming in and repurposing pixel artifacts as useful parts for a desired result falls in...
line with a long lineage of using bricolage for art. In this case, this surrounding garbage from the digital world has a lovely effect.

Bowman says his penchant for pixels emerged in the ’80s, when he first began dabbling with archaic graphic software, programs capable of only 16 colors. He just made do with what was available.

“It allowed me to more tightly arrange the pixels into geometric formations, something that appealed to me given my earlier training and practice as an architect in the 1960’s,” Bowman says. “Moreover, this was before Photoshop, so I did the next best thing. ... That is the way I have always preferred working, using whatever is currently available and looking for ways to make new works of art that have not been seen or done before.”

Sometimes Bowman starts completely from scratch, however. For example, with Cross Currents (see Figure 2) he began with a blank page in Photoshop and drew with various techniques provided by the software.

From Site Plans to Flatbed Scanners

Rope Rose (see Figure 3) is a different beast altogether. This image is one in a series of many floral scans that emerged as the next step in a decades-long sequence of reinventions. Thirty years ago, while still at Cornell, Bowman created a series of photos resulting from arrangements of objects on a flat copy stand in his campus studio. He mounted a 4” × 5” wood field camera above the copy stand, assiduously arranged objects on the stand, and made several exposures of the arrangements, repeating the process until he got the compositions he wanted.

“It was just like a site plan in architecture,” he recalls. “In a sense, I also realized this arranging was like a painter who might labor over a painting for months, sometimes changing the arrangement of elements, adding this, subtracting that. But photographically this could be accomplished in days, sometimes in a few hours.”

Jump to 2006 and Bowman found himself reinventing that same process with a flatbed scanner and Photoshop. The process is now much simpler and faster and the results much more immediate.

“Scanning is a process I still enjoy as you don’t always quite know what you will get,” Bowman confesses. “I still do a lot of scanning today in addition to all sorts of other manipulations of imagery.”

Abstract iPhonography

After buying an iPhone in 2010, Bowman says the quality of imagery stunned him. Over the past two years, he’s created a series of 13” × 26” digital giclee prints of straight still shots that he says are better than what he printed 40 years ago, using film, a darkroom, and silver-based photo paper.

What’s more, the recent explosion of high-quality photo manipulation apps has enabled Bowman to reinvent himself yet again. He can begin with a single iPhone photo, pipe it to one app, then another and another, over and over again, often producing something entirely unexpected and abstract. Sometimes this can happen in less than 30 minutes, he says.

“[It] reflects my fascination with shapes, color, and textures, which perhaps traces back to my years as an architect in terms of design and organization,” Bowman explains. “But also it reflects my current interest in abstract painting and abstract organization as well as my desire to cross media boundaries.”

Gary Singh lives and writes in San Jose, California. Contact him at gsingh@avantguild.com.