About the Cover

Electrifying Digital Abstract Art

Gary Singh

Merging the analog with the digital, fusing fine art with a design sensibility, Kevin O’Connell never completely leaves any of those realms. He’s both a fine artist who shoots representational imagery from the natural world and an electrifying digital abstractionist.

Even better, “electrifying” is not just a metaphor here, as O’Connell really is an electrician. He entered a four-year apprenticeship program straight out of high school—not normally a path applicable to a fine arts or design career. Nevertheless, being an electrician allowed him to travel all over the world, which subsequently allowed him to photograph numerous obscure locations off the beaten path. One pursuit led to the other, so to speak.

“All the men in my family including grandfathers, father, uncles, and cousins were electricians, so I was expected to do the same,” O’Connell recalled. “This job was never appealing to me, so I also freelanced as a photographer shooting weddings and portraits as well. In 2005, I needed to work as an artist, photographer full time, so I decided to use my skill as an electrician to work in remote places around the world that other photographers could not go to unless they had a skilled trade license.”

As a result, O’Connell lived all over the globe for five years, finding himself in places like Antarctica or islands in the central Pacific Ocean. High school electives in traditional photography, previously thought to only be a hobby, now came to the forefront and O’Connell found his calling. A few years ago, he went back to college to pursue a digital design degree at the Illinois Institute of Art, which only further enhanced his digital aesthetic.

“Digital imagery made it fun and exciting to design abstract-style digital paintings with a twist,” O’Connell says. “I have always been very fond of colors and shadow, so working with digital imagery I can change the shadow structure of individual pieces and parts along with different depths of color.”

Ghosts and Kitchens

O’Connell pulled an all-nighter when working on Buttons and Lace (the cover image). The painting flowed every step of the way, through various Photoshop incarnations.

“I started with an idea of taking round circles and placing them in a row, and then wanted to give them contour and texture to set them apart,” O’Connell explains. “From there, I would sit back and study the piece and add to it with different contrasts or parts.”

O’Connell says he prefers bold colors, and since color plays a huge role in his designs, every portion of the image needed to be a certain hue. Then a few textures gave the image some much-needed depth.

“When starting a new digital art, I usually don’t have any particular color in mind. I start with a couple different colors, and as I go forward, I change them periodically to enhance different sections or parts or to give it more or less contrast.”

With Nomads (see Figure 1), the process was more improvisatory than his usual approach. O’Connell tweaked away in the software until various interlocking ghost-like faces began to emerge, triggering memories of a film in which nomadic ghosts floated around their environment, wreaking havoc among the inhabitants of a particular landscape.
“I just wanted to ad lib on this piece and wait for my inspiration to come,” he says. “After many hours with layers in Photoshop, I stepped back to look over my work. Deep inside was an outline of a face that stood out to me. I remembered a movie I saw about these deadly ghost nomads and decided to design the rest of this work around these nomads.”

Another Dimension is a more representational image, but abstract ethereal elements come into play, nevertheless (see Figure 2). Multidimensional streetscapes merge with mysterious emotive hues of yellow and orange.

“Sometimes representational works can be very intriguing, with many different dimensions within a single piece of art,” O’Connell says. “Making these all blend together is quite hard, but when you get it right, they make for very interesting works.”

But O’Connell’s work is not limited to mystery and intrigue. His design degree especially came in handy when starting his kitchen art operation. Designed to be printed on metal, Geometrics came to O’Connell’s mind when his parents asked him to supply a traditional painting for their kitchen (see Figure 3). After doing so, he eventually changed his mind and came up with another idea. The kitchen featured cool blue and white components with stainless steel accents, and O’Connell envisioned a piece of metal art that complimented the aspects of the kitchen.

“Kitchens are the most expensive part of a home, and usually the most interesting architecturally,” he says. “They rarely have a piece of art solely designed to compliment them either, except for images of fruit, coffee, and other food related ideas. I wanted to design custom stand-alone pieces of art that would really pop, yet be cohesive.”

So he took down the traditional painting he originally gave them and designed Geometrics in its place. After printing it on metal, he put it up in his parents’ kitchen. He now specializes in metal art that matches kitchen décor.

The Fine Art of Design

Now that he’s a fine artist and commercial designer, O’Connell gets to navigate both of those landscapes. But he remains skeptical about the two ever completely merging. Traditional brick-and-mortar institutions rarely accept purely digital imagery, and they often view digital prints as reproductions.

“I believe that a digital painting can take just as long or longer that a traditional painting,” O’Connell says. “You need a lot of the same skill set for both. However, I do also feel that an original piece of art now becomes interesting. There is no original in a digital piece of art, and until there is a way that can happen, I do agree somewhat with the reasoning of traditional brick-and-mortar institutions.”

Nevertheless, O’Connell says a more realistic way to fuse the variety of backgrounds informing his practice would be to design a digital darkroom with electrical automation of lighting movement.

“I would like to incorporate designs from the digital darkroom with computer design to make some very interesting new style abstracts,” he says.

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Figure 2. Another Dimension. A more representational image, this piece features multidimensional streetscapes.

Figure 3. Geometrics. Designed to be printed on metal, this piece came to O’Connell when he was asked to supply a traditional painting for a kitchen.