About the Cover

Abstract Creative Practice

Gary Singh

Schooled during the analog era, Aurelia Zack used brushes, canvases, tubes of paint, and all the proprietary components of those disciplines. Without reservation, she claims boredom ensued.

“Big dusty studios, brushes and smelly oil paint, and turpentine soaked rags did not turn me on, and for many years, I used a simple B pencil to draw,” she writes on her website, adding that a 1990 purchase of a Macintosh changed her entire perspective. Such was the case for many people first discovering computers at that time, but in Zack’s case, she still couldn’t fully take advantage of her abstract art ambitions. As a result, she worked in the commercial world for 14 years, managing a graphics and exhibits studio, where endless catering to clients’ needs and incessant striving to realize the ideas of others drove her to dissatisfaction. Thankfully, she escaped and soon began her own creative practice, outside of the needs of clients.

In 2003, instead of building a new kitchen in her home, Zack bought a new Macintosh and began a new journey of creating her own art. Nowadays, she exhibits at brick-and-mortar galleries in her home country of Israel as well as in Europe.

“A turn of events caused me to finally focus on what I’ve always dreamed of—art,” she told me. “Not subservient to commercial ownership, not twisted by cheap, throw-away printing and forgettable messages. Art that can be felt and understood, art you look at, and the more you look the more you discover. Art that imprints and uplifts your spirit, art that makes you ask, ‘What is this?’”

Into the Abstract

Still based in north Israel, Zack has found solace in the digital world. Computers bring more dimensions to her penchant for nonrepresentational worlds. For example, the cover image, Abstract2, was the first in a larger series of images in which Zack challenged herself by working entirely with duotone imagery. Instead of seeing the superimposition of two halftones as inherently restrictive, she found it invigorating. When contemplating black and white photography, by comparison, Zack says one is more receptive to compositions. Balance between highlights and shadows, as well as much smoother shades of gray, all come to the surface much easier. Together, this enlightens the viewer, who no longer cares that the subject was originally in color. That’s the effect of black and white photography. When that attitude translates to software, even more intriguing psychologies develop.

“As much as I love colors, love the computer and the programs, this duotone challenge, this way of working, is a higher level of art,” Zack says, “It’s a higher level if I manage to make it interesting, cause that magnetic effect where the eyes keep looking and the brain keeps discovering more and more details it did not notice before. It’s truly a silent, lengthy dialogue.”

Admittedly, though, Zack says these types of images, far more time-consuming to create, often require the most explaining. Plus, deciding when she’s arrived at a stopping point becomes more challenging.

“Artists that are comfortable drawing with a simple pencil or marker will be more comfortable trying out the duotone limitation,” she says. “It’s like owning a candy store but deciding to limit yourself to only two sweets per month. The denial of instant gratification that the computer encourages, and resisting the temptation of the ‘fast and easy,’ has its rewards, big time.”

Most of Zack’s abstract work, however, does not fall into the duotone category. HideAway (see Figure 1) and SeeItAll (see Figure 2), for example, indicate subtle but rich gradations of color. They exude an essence somewhere between a whimsical vintage science fiction dream sequence and a Photoshop tutorial gone wonderfully awry. Last year, SeeItAll was one of the Director’s Choice selections by the Museum of Computer Art in New York.

From the Bubblegum Machine

Much like the analog world, some digital abstract artists work by trial and error, by processes of ad
lib or improvisation, freely implementing techniques as they go. Others have a clear image of a final product in mind when they start. Often the process is intuitive. In Zack’s case, she says her process is more like a bubblegum machine.

“I feel like the images are waiting in some sort of order, my function being one of a custodian,” she says. “Statistics and probability are the only two mathematics I understand, and they are mixed into the fabric of the image. There is no end to the number of combinations using Photoshop’s functions. I see no end to the variety of images still to come.”

As with many digital artists, Zack thinks the computer is simply another tool. For example, it can store all the variations and sketches an artist can dream up. Limited only by the hard drive or cloud storage space, the computer doesn’t care if the artist has no money for new canvases, brushes, or paint tubes. But the human element still pervades. The artist still needs to make his or her own creative choices. The computer won’t provide any feedback on the compositional choices or whether the color combinations work.

“In this regard, the computer is no smarter than the modest pencil,” Zack says. “But I would go as far as to say that an artist trained in the classic techniques would have a hard time trying to equal the computer’s ability to deliver exactly what the mind envisions. No more wastebaskets full of sketches.”

FragmentedMemory (see Figure 3) is another result of the bubblegum machine. Zack believes analog artists who already work in the abstract are usually the ones who transition to the digital world much more easily. They feel more comfortable with the wide variety of options provided by software, plug-ins, and rendering techniques.

“I can only imagine what artists like Paul Klee, Malevich, Mondrian, and the giants of abstract art would have done with computers,” Zack says. “What would they have done, instead of having

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