Coming Into Focus: 
An Interview with Ellen Jantzen

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Ellen Jantzen, the artist (www.ellenjantzen.com), works with geographic composition that focuses attention on graphic elements in a scene, which might make her career particularly interesting to those working with geographic data and visualization. We enjoy experiencing her work, which is best viewed in a large format.

Francesca Samsel: We think your work will be of interest to our readers as they grapple with emergent issues in presenting reality and augmented reality as well as representing time-varying data. Let’s begin with a bit about your background and perspective.

Ellen Jantzen: I started life in Missouri, where I was raised and got my first degree in graphic arts. Then I spent about 20 years in Los Angeles, where I got a degree in fashion design and worked for a large corporation. I eventually burned out on the corporate life though. When I was young I thought a full-on artistic life wasn’t practical, so I went into graphic arts and fashion design. When I grew up and realized I was an artist, I focused on my art to rebel at first. I started out with digital cameras in the late 1990s when they were pretty low resolution, but I found a niche as cameras improved in the 2000s.

Bruce Campbell: Was there a trajectory in your work where later work built upon your earlier work?

Ellen: My initial work in California was not emotionally represented—it was about what I could do with the camera. In 2010 I started realizing that finding my emotional state was important in how I represented my work. I was dealing with my mother-in-law changing as she developed Alzheimer’s, became a different person, and went into a nursing home. Essentially, my husband was losing his mother. During this time, I created a series of work called Losing Reality that was emotion based and that became the genesis of my current intuitive, emotive approach to my work.

Figure 1. Remaining a Mystery. This piece is part of Ellen Jantzen’s Disturbing the Spirits series, which deals with both reality and time and the healing powers of the natural environment.
Francesca: What were your first landscape pieces?

Ellen: In 2013 I worked on my Disturbing the Spirits series while experiencing the aging of my own parents in St. Louis. I wanted to play with the landscapes I saw and how losing my parents as I had known them was affecting my experience of the world. I was attuned to time and noticing how the seasons were changing, much like my parents. Remaining a Mystery shows the roots of where I started with landscapes (see Figure 1).

At that point, time became a focus for me, and I found the highly iterative approach to be effective, giving me a sense of actively time traveling. Being in St. Louis, I became interested in the fullness of having four distinct seasons. Committed to Memory represents the effect of combining components from different seasons in the same location (see Figure 2), which I spent a lot of time doing.

Francesca: Your piece entitled Strata has some dramatic layering compared with your other pieces, and yet I can still see obvious connections to your earlier work (see Figure 3).

Ellen: Strata was created in 2016 when I was experiencing much emotional turbulence. Both of my parents died within a short stretch of time. Since there was no longer a need to remain in the St. Louis area, my husband and I decided to move to Santa Fe. I was no longer immersed in Midwest scenery—Santa Fe is a very different place.

During that time, my work helped me investigate the reality of losing and loss—the personal loss of my parents, the loss of seasons, and a sense of loss with what’s going on with the environment on a grander scale. Strata is the result of numerous iterations. Many of the other iterations provide a similar emotional result.

Bruce: Of all the pieces we are highlighting, Strata evokes the most emotional turbulence for me.

Ellen: Thank you. I find that people interpret my work in completely different ways than I would expect. They bring such different things to experiencing the art, and thus I get different responses. That’s then their truth, which is good.

Francesca: I see layering and manipulations with some elements but not others. What is your thought process? What decisions do you make when you combine time and space?

Ellen: In the last series I did in St. Louis, I found myself working with circles to represent coming full circle—a completion if you will—like what you saw in Committed to Memory.

In New Mexico I initially used a lot of pixilation to represent feelings coming into focus—this is how I started my current series.

Now I want to transform the environments I photograph to make them my own, like what I’ve done with Amplification (see Figure 4). I’m more pleased with my latest work in the Coming Into Focus series as my iteration process continues to come of age.

Francesca: Let’s focus on your latest work. Auto-Chrome pays beautiful attention to color.
Ellen: Thank you. AutoChrome was taken near Taos, New Mexico. I used a graphics editing tool to stretch the mountains and make them taller and more dramatic. The photo shoot took place just after a snowfall, which provided a more exciting change in color. I like the road, the “curve ahead” sign, and the airplane going by in the sky (see Figure 5). I wanted to emphasize particular colors, so I made the sky black and white. The focus goes to the mountains and the snow in the foreground.

I like the combination of working with both my emotional interior and graphic eye. If I don’t like the graphical aspects of a picture, the piece stops there. To me, the work has to have both.

Francesca: Cloudburst is interesting to me because of the surrealistic feel (see Figure 6).

Ellen: I liked the impact that the cloud has on the Earth, so I exaggerated that.

Francesca: You are using different visuals to try and get different points across.

Ellen: Yes, and I like to title pieces in a way that leaves things open to interpretation. For example, I might add climate change ideas into an image, but I want the viewer to bring his/her own perspective to the emotional response.

Bruce: I can’t help but think of parallels between you injecting your emotional response into a composition and a scientist trying to inject a representation of uncertainty for data used in a visualization.

Ellen: Good analogy! I work from the emotional side, intuitively, and then select graphical elements to represent what my emotional response is. I find intuition easier because it’s more genuine if it is created internally—it’s more fresh. It’s not from the brain but a gut feeling. Each piece of work starts with an internal impetus and iterates emotionally until the graphical elements represent that intuition. Once I am happy with a piece, I set about to title it. I try to make my titles poetic, not merely descriptive. I use a thesaurus quite a bit to find just the correct nuanced words.

Bruce: Which is why we hope your work interests our audience. We like showing the differences in training and experience between the scientist and the artist and how those trajectories affect work. We want the two groups to be able understand
each other’s points of view and be willing to operate in the space in between.

**Ellen:** The artist’s approach can bring a fresh, natural perspective versus what I see from taking a strictly scientific approach.

**Ellen Jantzen** is an artist working out of Santa Fe, New Mexico. She has been included in numerous solo and group exhibitions in the US and Europe, and her work has earned several awards including a First Prize at PX3, Paris in 2013. Jantzen has a degree in advanced fashion design from the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising. Contact her at ellenjantzen@me.com.

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