

Patricia Olynyk: Means and Medium

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The twin digital extravaganzas of 2001—the Whitney's "Bitstreams" in New York, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's "010101"—marked the end of an era, not its beginning. Mounted just as the great U.S. internet boom turned bust, these exhibits were the last cry of digital art's infancy. Despite grand ambitions, the generally mediocre level of work in both shows finally exhausted the era's rhetoric. Like the exhibits' titles, the artwork on display mostly thematized digital tools and techniques. As a result, neither show demonstrated a revolution in art. Instead, both documented a pervasive enchantment with technology.

Two important exceptions offer guidance as we embark on the next, more articulate stage of digital art. Janet Cardiff's video and audio guide in San Francisco engaged visitors in a multimedia conversation with their environment, transforming the experience of the museum by literally whispering in visitors' ears. Robert Lazzarini's "Skulls," at the Whitney, used image manipulation software and rapid prototyping to distort and recast human skulls into shapes that defied perspective. Both pieces created powerful experiences dependent on digital technology. Yet these artists employed the technology to accomplish artistic goals unrelated to it. To call either a "digital artist" would be to misrepresent and misunderstand their achievements. Almost alone among the artists in these exhibits, Cardiff and Lazzarini subsumed the digital means of their art into the artworks themselves.

What does this mean for "digital art"? I believe it spells the demise of the term. Nothing significant is said when this art is called "digital." Instead, the term merely covers our embarrassment. Art is changing under the influence of digital technology. But we still haven't grasped exactly how. We still don't know what to call the hybrid forms it makes possible. The thematic use of the term "digital" signals the failure to articulate these changes.

Patricia Olynyk's prints explore the art of printmaking in this moment of profound transition. In materials and technique, her work both draws on and moves beyond the traditional definition of print. The artist employs digital processes in each piece, but she also uses lithography, collage, and traditional Japanese papermaking methods. And while she participated in the Brooklyn Museum of Art's "Digital Printmaking Now" exhibit in 2001, little is said of her work when it is described as "digital."

Instead, like several of her contemporaries at the Brooklyn show, Olynyk combines digital and traditional methods to create complex palimpsests of imagery. Although the precision of line in her prints may suggest the computer's influence, digital technology serves as a means, rather than a medium. It contributes to the work in the same measure as the pre-digital technology of papermaking. As a printmaker, Olynyk finds herself in the space between digital technology and traditional printmaking. And while her pieces tap the rich resources of both, they belong to a convergent form that has yet to be critically defined.

Like Janet Cardiff and Robert Lazzarini, Patricia Olynyk shows that the computer can become an attribute of almost any medium; it can participate in the tradition of almost any art form. The term "digital print" merely obscures these changes, naming a technology and a tradition, but bracketing an unknown. To grapple with the powerful, moving works these artists have created, we must find a more nuanced and incisive vocabulary, inflected to the specifics of each new form. As with "traditional" media, the significance of art created with digital means is still found in the finished work, not in the tools that artists use to create it.