



Figure 1: untitled (The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog), Alex M. Lee, archival inkjet print, 2013.

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An interview with Alex M. Lee

N. 'The New Romantics' exhibition is putting together a group of artists that are thinking about Romantic gestures from the nineteenth century or late eighteenth century and are kind of refashioning or reconfiguring those gestures into contemporary technology. Those gestures for me use poetic irony, simulation of space, thinking about place, and are about lyricism. A lot of this work relies on notions of returning to nature as well as notions of returning to the body and self. Your work is really fitting as examples of that – especially this idea of selfness in terms of locating one's body within space and then how does that space respond to and speak to the body.

A. Initially I went into art-making through photography. I fell in love in the darkroom. That was my space, my place where I could find a kind of a magical moment, a magical space where you can have this process of using chemicals to capture light. When I saw that transition between digital and analogue in undergrad I did feel a sense of personal loss that I would not be in a darkroom anymore. The last colour machine that my school had they had to get rid of. They had to just dump it.

Maybe that shift forced me to reinvestigate what I was working with. Also theoretically what I could do with this new methodology of imaging.

N: Do you feel like your more recent work – the digital work – is attempting to recuperate that sense of loss from that discarded analog technology?

A. Yeah I think at a subconscious level it might. It is an attempt to bring back the mythologies that I saw with analogue technology that I didn't see with digital. This kind of quality of warmth with light. The earlier work that I made with the digital camera and also once I started getting into 3D imaging and 3D modelling was inherently cold because of the qualities of that medium. The digital to me is inherently cold. It is a cold medium. I think on my part I'm attempting to bring a warm place to the digital.

N. That brings me back to my initial question which was about talking about light and talking about the uses of light within your work. Whether it be through simulating eclipses or whether it be through simulating the passage of time. I was wondering if you could talk about that use of light in your work and light being a simulated presence within your work.

A. It's interesting because it is inherently fake. I am simulating these events which are produced not by my hand but through this kind of box. The box is this 3D-platform application but there's no inscription of my hand. However, the haptic method of modelling is through this kind of tool – the mouse – that's kind of like I'm building something using my hand: In a way I want to relate that to photography.

In the darkroom I was using my hands constantly, manipulating the chemicals and manipulating the various apparatuses of the enlarger. That was the box that I was using and the mechanisms that I was using in order to get the result I was intending.

N. It's interesting the connection you're making between a haptic sense and a photographic sense, because I feel that the combination of those two technologies is almost creating a post-sculptural space.

A. It's a fusion. It's post-sculptural and post-photographic, and also post-painterly. There's decisions I make with color and texture that *I'm sure painters make similar kinds of decisions*. But I'm coming at it from this experience that is more photographic. That is the door I'm going through in order to arrive at my work. I'm using the photographic training I have and I see a lot of similarities between a virtual camera and a physical camera – the aperture settings, the manipulation of shadows, the 3D and the output itself.

N. Do you consider that process of simulation as kind of conceptual platform that informs your work? I ask this because you're not only talking about light in simulation, but you're also talking about the way that light and/or radiation that gets recorded in other mediums.

A. It's always inherently there and I layer it whether it's intentional or not. Essentially, it boils down to, yes indeed, light. It's an interesting paradox because it's not actually light. It's what we consider to be representational of these kinds of things, but it's interesting because none of it is actually light itself. It's always these kinds of things that are manufactured within the algorithm. It's all fake!

N. This notion of fakeness in terms of simulating, because it's not quite fakeness, right?

A. It is a mediated experience. We are doing things that are simulated and the processes that are going on within the algorithms of the computer is a mediated experience is because it is occurring through this kind of the presentation whether it be like projection or the LCD screen (which is also producing light).

N. I think that the process of mediation is really interesting in terms of thinking about cooperating or collaborating with software. If we're talking about the fakeness of the renderings that you're outputting, it seems like you're conscientious of

this collaboration from the get-go. Are you wanting to accentuate that conversation between yourself and your software?

A. The computer represents an alternate kind of framework to look at in terms of how we perceive reality. How we measure time, how we view light, how we attempt to describe our universe...

N. *...but those units of measurement are just as artificial, one could argue, as the artificiality of the renderings that you're making, right?*

A. I think that's kind of a point of departure for me. I'm trying to get at the essence of reality. So in a sense, the works are kind of exploring these things or these kinds of measurements and the accelerated pace at which scientific development takes place. It's also a kind of attempting to describe what's going on right now. It's an attempt at exploring these developments through the practice of making art.

At the early part of the twentieth century, all of those avant-garde movements – or a lot of the movements – were trying to describe the machine age. The machine age and the advent of the machine – we're kind of going through a similar kind of experience. But we're going through it during the information age, through the computer, so it's a kind of interesting parallel to think about.

N. *Yeah and I think that that's something that the hypothesis of this exhibition is suggesting... that the origins of early twentieth century resistance against the machine can be found within Romanticism. We're suggesting that within this hypothesis there's a lot of similarities in process that are happening between the two generations.*

A. Do you see that kind of similarity happening in a nostalgic kind of way?

N. *Yeah I think that there is a tendency in Romanticism to have nostalgic thoughts or sentimental thoughts for the past. But it depends on what kind of lens or framework you're looking at. Occasionally that sentimentality is coming from a place of loss that you expressed before. Although there is a sense of progress and although there is a sense of going towards a kind of new liberation, there's also something being discarded, or abandoned or obsolesced in that process.*

A. Yes. It's hard to recoup.

N. *Yes, exactly. There's just an abundance and there's such a speed of this kind of development that it's hard to really know where to start.*

A. A lot of data we encounter we have to just scroll through. Making artworks is interesting for me because it's an attempt to also recoup and make meaningful – the segments of data that would otherwise be overlooked.

When we talk about abstraction I'm not talking about abstraction in a formal sense, but rather I'm talking about working away from something generally pictorial. The abstraction happens conceptually through any kind of phenomenological investigation. That's probably what I think about.

N. *I think that you can look at Romantic painting and it's kind of the pinnacle of the picturesque, it's the pinnacle of kind of Realism and...*

A. Well-composed, well-structured imaging.

N. Yes, certainly. Yet, the motivation of creating such imagery is not based solely on mastery of form. It has interest in political statement, it has interest in the mind, it has interest in history, it has interest in poetry. Is that something that really resonates with you in your own work?

A. Instead of being influenced by poetry, my work is a result of external thoughts outside of a formal structure. Whether it be the passage of time or the act of developments in science. I'm keeping up with what's going on in science, specifically technology and astronomy. A lot of the work that is informed by that, whether it be on the surface or not on the surface.

N. The fascinating part of this is that scientists are beginning to use the same tools that artists are with regards to representations of data and information. More and more scientists are relying on 3D simulation, or are relying on texture mapping in the same way that happens within 3D mapping. So it makes sense that you're looking toward science as a place where new forms of representation are occurring...

A. Actually, I'm organizing this kind of mini-conference on that subject. Specifically on that subject, on scientists using artistic approaches. For instance, I've been looking at the translating method in Kepler's Spacecraft. The way they discovered extra-solar planets is through this slight dip in light that a star produces; through this kind of measurement of the light of the star, this subtle shift. By observing the star and also observing the slight wobble of the star, you can get a picture – or scientists can get a picture – of what kind of orbiting body is creating that effect, and through that method they were able to discover. There is a video diagram that plots all the planets that were discovered this way. That representation is a virtual or digital orrery, essentially.

N. Do you think that kind of scientific representation is coming into your own work?

A. I mean the works that are eclipses, are directly inspired by the Kepler Orrery and it is this kind of virtual depiction. Now I do take that as a point of departure. I do abstract that, so it's not a kind of one-for-one relationship – not just kind of this scientific visualization but rather it's kind of this abstract product.

N. With that kind of abstraction in mind I'm wondering if we can return to the ways in which you specifically use references to Romantic painting within your work and what those references mean to you.

A. I'm assuming you're referencing Caspar David Friedrich and the way that he used the void. Although he made this kind of all-encompassing landscape, it is not the same kind of void we are dealing with now. So I was interested in using a more contemporary medium – as an effort of producing imagery that is structurally the same, but with to the sort of content of this world that speaks to our era; or else with an understanding of the void that we're dealing with today.

N. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit more about the difference in the void that you see between then and now.

A. That void was for a lot of the Romantics made in an attempt at dealing with or a reaction to – I'm guessing – the Industrial Revolution. But also it's kind of

a reaction to the things that were going on in science back then in the natural sciences.

It is an interesting parallel, I would say, that we are kind of dealing with the advent of the computer in this information age. That advent has specifically spawned the possibilities of virtual representation or hyper-reality. That's something that I am attempting to describe in my work as well.

N. My own understanding of the similarity between what was happening and what's happening now is thinking about a continued conversation of what the virtual can offer to artists of each time. I would argue that the landscape paintings of the Romantic era, whether it be Turner or the Hudson River Valley School or Caspar David Friedrich, are approaching the virtual in very contemporary ways. The main difference is that they're just using different means of simulation. But now we have newer technology to question the virtuality the spaces we inhabit –

A. – I've been wary of using the word better when it's just different. If we look at it a couple years from now will it be better – the likeness of this kind of medium or approach? My hope with what I'm working on is that it speaks to the images that the Romantics were doing, and that we're both searching for this kind of awe-inspiring aesthetic experience.

If you look at a lot of what's going on in the commercial industry at the moment, a lot of it is geared toward verisimilitude. It is this attempt at awe; it is this kind of complex of algorithms, churning out awe geared toward penetrating this visual hyper-reality – visual awe.

I think what's going on with the representation in my video evaluations of the incubations of time, are formally so tied up in phenomenology, that I do want the viewer to slow down. It's interesting those reactions I get from various audiences. Sometimes, especially with the sun dial piece (*Haeshigae (for Proust)*), they don't even notice that it is moving. We're just so used to something at a certain speed that when we actually are forced to slow down, we can't. Instead audiences just walk by very quickly, not even noticing the work is changing. Although I know that varies with each specific audience, I'm talking about the general public.

But the works are designed also to be this kind of slow-moving painting. The works slowly develop through this kind of – I'm hesitant to say – uncanny motivation. The works evolve at a certain pace and some of its elements are designed to move quicker than others.

N. That's the thing that you located before, that the origin of those things is being based in the photographic process.

A. I consider them as evolving pictures. There's this kind of stillness that is clear to me I hope it rubs off on audience's perception of the work. In a sense they are things that I want everyone to look at in the looping framework. I want audiences to come up to the pictures in their own time and view the work at their own leisure. These things have no beginning or end, and in that I hope my work frees you up to experience it at your own rate.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Alex M. Lee was born in Seoul, Korea (1982) and grew up in the United States of America. He received his B.F.A. at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago with an emphasis in Photography in 2007. After working in the

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photography industry he received his M.F.A. at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago with an emphasis in Art & Technology in 2009. He is currently assistant professor in the Digital Arts & Sciences Department at Clarkson University located in Potsdam, NY – a small science and engineering university located north of the Adirondack Mountains where he divides his time between Potsdam, NY and Montreal, QC. He has exhibited internationally as well as within the United States. Selected exhibitions include: 'Mio Photo', Osaka, Japan; South Side Community Art Center, Chicago, Illinois; The Gene Siskel Film Center, Chicago, Illinois; Doubner Space, Prague, Czech Republic; Sacramento University, Sacramento, California; Gallery DOS, Seoul, Korea.

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