PIXEL
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THE COMPUTER IMAGE MAGAZINE

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STEVEMILLER

IMAGES OF IMAGES

If the different expressive techniques of the audio-visual world have been incorporating electronic imagery from some time, it's not so often that one runs into painters or artists coming from a traditional fine arts context who are preoccupied with the latest tools for creating images. Those rare individuals like Matta, who exhibited for the second time at Imagina this year, have to be considered as exceptions. All the more reason to look out for the paintings of Steve Miller, who has been showing his work in throughout the States and in Europe for some time now.

On one level, painting and the electronic image seem to be almost directly opposed to one another. It's a question of light. In painting, the light which reveals the image comes from the outside, while the backlit glow of a CRT, bringing its own light with it, shines out even from a dark room. The formal consequences of uniformly smooth, backlit screens also imply a transformation of the tactile dimension of painting, if they do not abolish it altogether. This fundamental difference establishes a genuine distance between the two mediums permitting the first artists to use electronic imagery to begin to map out hitherto unexplored territory. All the previous academic discussions centered around the notions of "light" and "material" are just not equipped to deal with the kind of images Miller describes below, images which appear on screens, in photos of screens, and which conduct the viewer into a hall of mirrors where the thing represented disappears beneath endless reflections of representation itself. What is interesting in his work arises, before anything else, from the quality of the composition and realization of his images. That they should be produced with new technologies doesn't necessarily add anything to them they didn't possess before. The bothersome labels of "electronic art" or "computer art" often conceal artists whose work is remarkable even without reference to the new media they use. Steve Miller is without the slightest doubt one of them. His exhibitions have helped show that artists fascinated with modern tools have henceforth their place in the often insular world of contemporary art.

«Purged of all accretions of the familiar & sentimental» acrylic, silkscreen/canvas 1989

In the following interview, Miller precisely situates himself in respect to art history, lucidly tracing an outline of the development of the new techniques which have arisen out of the largest artistic developments of the last three decades.

PIXEL: What trajectory have you followed to arrive at your current work?

STEVE MILLER: Before starting to use the computer to produce my paintings, I had done large-scale installation work, in which video monitors played an important part.

In the installations produced in 1980 for White Columns (New York), I created a "camouflage" environment in black and white where one could exchange merchandise with the aid on a screen at the center of the exposition space.

For another installation produced for Artist's Space, in New York, I placed a monitor in a business office space which gave you access to up-to-the-minute stock information coming from the New York Stock Exchange. The office was itself situated in a "military" environment adorned with multiple camouflages and painted statistic displays which provided economic data concerning corporate gains.

At the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 1983, I created an installation presenting technical economic data

«Hungry armature of addiction» oil, silkscreen/canvas 1989

inside the wood-paneled smoking room of an exclusive men's club which overlooked the ruin of New York City's south Bronx.

In all of these installations, electronic information was delivered through the intermediary of the monitor, making a sort of umbilical link with information culture.

Before showing these projects, I had worked as an assistant director on commercial films, as well as making my own short films independently. At the beginning of the 70s I did traditional paintings with an easel.

PIXEL: How did you begin to work with electronics and computers?

S.M: Throughout my installations, I quickly realized that electronic information was the best way to establish cultural links between two places, and that moreover, "high culture" itself shared the same idea. Art today is bought and sold by telephone, this interview was made possible by fax, museums and galleries do the inventories of their collections with the help of computers and laser discs...

In a way, installations are frustrating, because they are temporary, and the limit of an exposition limits in turn the spectator. I wanted to return to painting without completely sacrificing the cultural link between art and electronic technology. I thought as well that if this technology was going to have a fundamental effect in the collective consciousness of this century, it would probably be linked to the development of artificial intelligence. So, using the computer as a means of mediation between painting (Fine Art) and mass culture seemed completely natural to me.

PIXEL: Which machines do you work with and how do you use them?

S.M.: My first encounter with a computer was in 1983, while I was working for Caesar Video Graphics in New York. Peter Caesar gave me free access to a Chyron and a Dubner, which I used to digitize and manipulate my images. Both of them were color character generators used for the creation of electronic type.

Later, I continued to work with him on an ADO (Ampex Digital Optics), a graphics computer with digital special effects. I have also used an Artronics and more recently a simple
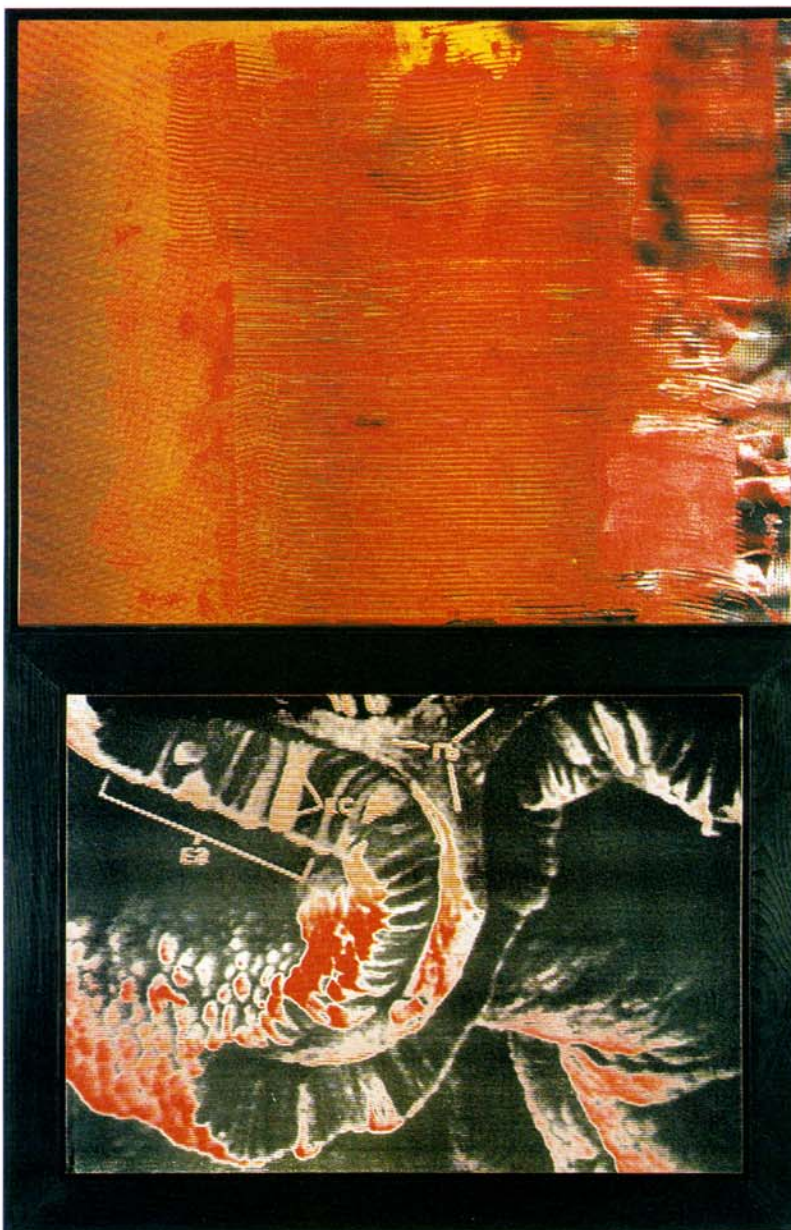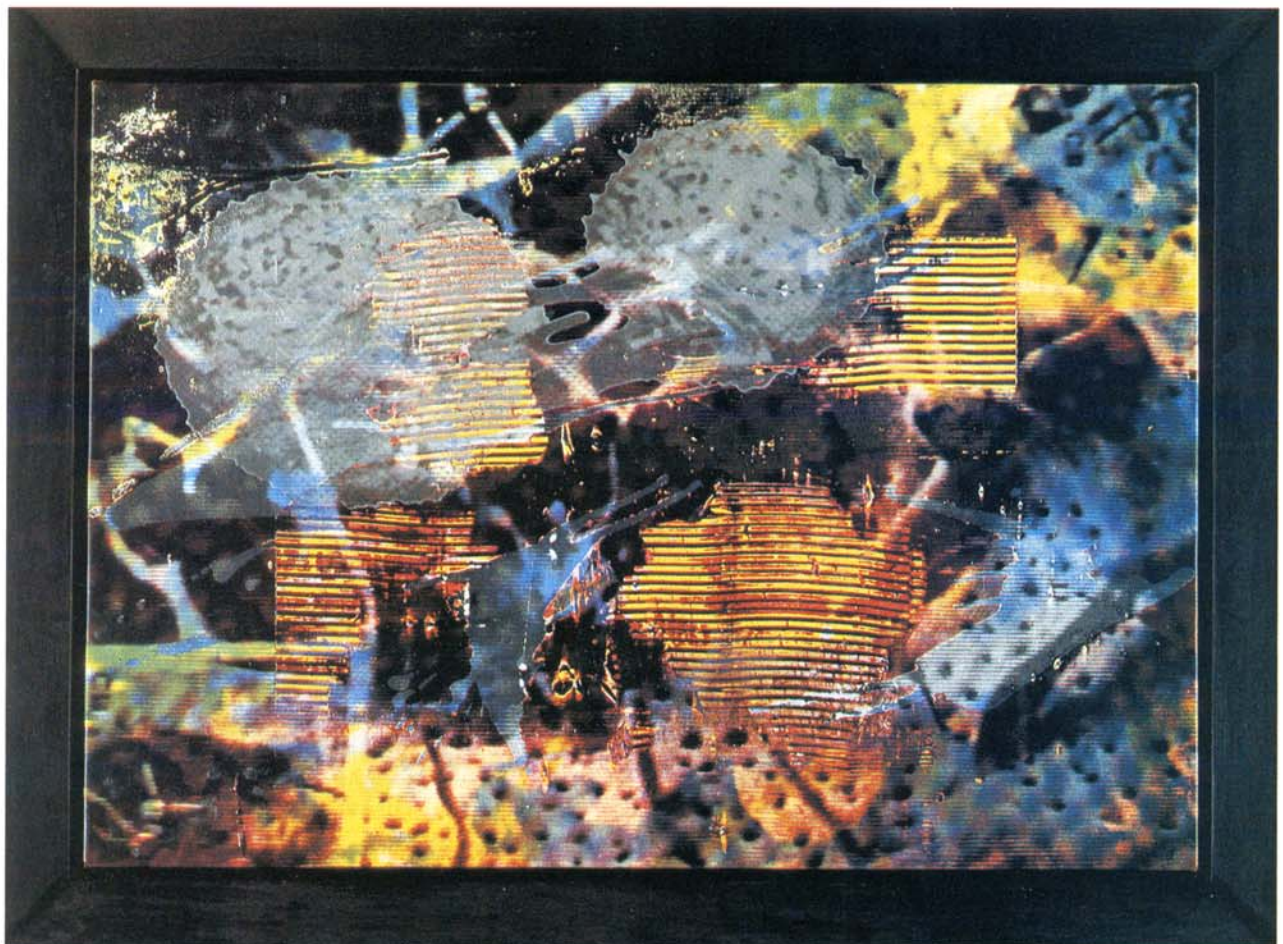
«Twin deformities» oil, silkscreen/canvas 1989

«The relationship of clinical paranoïa to the phenomenon of religion conversion» acrylic, silkscreen/canvas 1989

Macintosh. At the point I'm at, I take advantage of everything that's available, but I should say that at the moment I prefer the less powerful Macintosh over the high performance of an ADO.

PIXEL: Do you still work without computers?

S.M.: In the first stages, I create the paintings, but the computer lets me encode them in another language. Since 1986, all of my pictures have carried some trace of a computer-assisted process.

PIXEL: How did the market react to your pictures? Did the critics accept your use of these new tools?

S.M.: Beginning with the introduction of photography in the 19th century, there has always been a sector of the public who have resisted new technologies. In the last ten years, the photograph has succeeded in escaping the restrictive boundaries which previously defined it and has joined the ranks of painting and sculpture. Artists like Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Alan Belcher have contributed to the entry of the photo into the context of the art market. I think that works which employ the latest technologies will have to face the same phenomenon of resistance. Exactly like there were exhibitions of "photographic art", these last years have seen numerous expositions of "electronic art". Warhol met with opposition when he chose to make the media his medium. In the same way, there is resistance to technology. But Warhol more than succeeded in introducing pop culture and the media into art, and Nam June Paik injected video into sculpture. Soon, no doubt, the use of computers will be an equally accepted practice.

PIXEL: What are your thoughts on artists using computers?

«Enclave of burgeoning technologies» acrylic, silkscreen/canvas 1989

S.M.: In the culture of electronic media, the computer is now a basic medium. It goes without saying that the more natural the artificial becomes, the more artists will begin to examine these tools, which from that point forward will become a part of their daily life.

PIXEL: Do you think that it's necessary for an artist to use a technique proper to his period to be genuinely contemporary?

S.M.: Art addresses itself to thought and seeks to comprehend relationships, whether they be interior, personal, external, or cultural, metaphysical, philosophical, or all of these at once. To limit oneself to a single tool is absurd.

PIXEL: Can you describe the theme of your pictorial research?

S.M.: At the moment, I begin with electronic microscope images of virus, or images relating to the human body, and rework them using a computer. These images have been shown in some of my most recent exhibitions. I see pathology as a metaphor for culture.

This idea came to me while I had my first Parisian exhibition at the Galerie du Génie in 1988. I was working then with Rorschach blots, solarized by computer. I like these inkblots because they are real painted traces of the mental health of the subject/spectator. I would like to think of my work in its totality as a reflection of the emotional health of the public. From that idea, I arrived at more general considerations on the health of culture. My thinking brought me to look at the interior of the body with a medical eye, and to find there an image of external culture. Interview by Michel Corbou

«Lost under supersturctures of muscle graft» oil, silkscreen/canvas 1989

«Immunoprocessives» acrylic, silkscreen/canvas 1989