

Beyond Paranoia and Sour Grapes: Debunking the Stigma of Digital Art in the Fine Art World

Robert McClintock, the Artist, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

As a fulltime professional photographer and artist over the past 25 years I have come to realize that being on the front edge of any medium can be dangerous. It seems that the art world has to give its golden nod of approval before the ball can drop and you can be rewarded with a kind review and maybe even a show. As someone who has been consistently in the vanguard of experimenting with new mediums, critical acclaim has always been hard fought, but the personal satisfaction of creating something new and different is very rewarding... *"Yeah right"*.

My whole life as an artist has been somewhat defiant to the traditional paths of the art world. I'm a college dropout and 100% self-taught artist photographer. I'm definitely considered an outsider in the fine world because I decided long ago that I would actually make a good living as an artist, which to me includes having a nice house, a nice car, eating well, having cable and HDTV.

As a commercial photographer I treated everyone as a client, and if I was to pick up my camera it was because I was being paid. I didn't bring my camera to weddings as a favor. Although I was very good photographer who would always come home with what the client wanted, I never thought I was truly outstanding. I started to consider myself a "master plumber of photography." I could shoot anything, anywhere. I'd work all day on a great cover of a bathroom caulk catalog with edgy lighting, all in focus or intentionally out of focus, but I knew 5 other guys that could have done it. I became more and more frustrated with my commercial future and finally after about 15 years I burned out. Although I could of course still be bribed into a job here and there if I was late on the cable bill.

At that time in 1996 the digital photography world was making itself known. I bought an Apple Quicktake 100 and started shooting and playing around with the then arousing 320x240 pixels at 72 dpi. I had also begun freelancing at a full digital studio here in Baltimore shooting catalogs and commercial advertisements. There were two Macintosh workstations, and we were shooting with Fuji GX680s with triple pass color wheels and Leafscan backs, and there were two Photoshop experts doing full service pre-press work, outputting proofs on a Fuji Pictography. It was definitely cutting edge technology and Polaroid test shots and color transparency film were on the way out. Things were changing in the old photo world and with Photoshop you really didn't have to be that great a technician anymore. Photoshop trickery was becoming the norm. The days of one great shot on a 4x5 view camera were gone and \$500 an hour Scitex fixes were definitely gone.

For many years I had been painting on and scratching my photo prints and was having great fun. In 1978 I bought a new SX70 Polaroid Camera. Eventually I became somewhat known for my SX70 Polaroid art, getting accepted into the International Polaroid Collection in 1991, and then being selected from the collection for the American Perspectives Exhibit with other artists like Andy Warhol, Joyce Tennyson and Chuck Close. Nevertheless, manipulated Polaroid photos proved to be a somewhat misunderstood medium by the purists, I felt there was just so much I could do with it, and I began feeling like my work looked like everyone else's. So the process had begun for me to find a new medium. I was getting hands on training at the digital studio, shooting and learning color correction and helping to silhouette the hundreds of catalog shots of paint cans and bricks pavers. I started to think that I could probably create some original art using this newfound medium. I acquired Adobe Photoshop v3.5 (legally, with a bundled scanner purchase!) and loaded it on my screaming Macintosh Quadra 610 with 32 Megs of ram, one of the fastest machines in the Apple lineup.

I knew Photoshop as a image editing tool was unsurpassed, and I played around with the stock filters effects like watercolor, palette knife, paint daubs and saturation sliders and got some whacked out looking stuff that was definitely intriguing, but once again I got the feeling that everyone could do this to a photo. The desktop publishing phenomena had fostered the idea of "create professional looking brochures in minutes," and now Photoshop and Fractal Painter was heading out to conquer the art world with ads saying "Simulate painting...transform your photos with realistic paintbrush effects with different canvas textures." Yet I pushed ahead and bought one the early Wacom tablets and started to make broad brush strokes and blend colors the way I wanted them to be, which was something the computer could never do.

Honestly, I'm not that big of a dumb-head to think no one but ME can do this because I'm the only artist capable of "digital greatness." I'm really trying to get beyond my "paranoia and sour grapes" about this being legitimate art. The thing is that finding uniqueness in what you do should be the highest goal. If we all create art the exact same way then there's a problem, making art should not be a turnkey franchise opportunity that always works. Conversely, I really encourage everyone that if it makes them happy to take pictures of their kid's birthday party and then run it through the computer and whack out the faces, and they're having fun doing it, then they should do it. No doubt there can great personal satisfaction in doing that. I just want people today to understand the difference between the frenzied point and click digital world and what I consistently do creating an intentional thoughtful piece of art.

No one ever asks the carpenter what brand saw he used to build the house. For the writer it makes no sense to ask if she used Word Perfect or Microsoft Word to write her book. The tools don't create, people create. It's interesting in my experience when people view my art and say "Oh, its Photoshop..." My ears get hot, because I think they think they know exactly how it's done because they have a digital camera and Paint Shop Pro. And I think they think they suddenly grasp my whole life leading to this moment in one fell swoop and now they "get it". Parents for centuries have nudged their child while looking at art and say, "you could do this." Whether or not the kid ever picks up a pencil or paintbrush remains to be seen, some do, most don't. But they do go home and click on Paint Shop Pro before soccer practice and make up something in minutes and bang it out on their little Epson, and that's the way it is now. Whether it's fine art or music. Even I sit down to Apple's new Garage Band and lay down a groove that makes me think I should send this to Sting and let him know that I got it too. I sometimes suffer from the syndrome of "the world has waited long enough, when is American Idol coming to Baltimore?"

People often come to me and ask if I can make a series for them like an Andy Warhol with the different color backgrounds and hues of the same image repeated. I, of course, say "No, that's what Andy Warhol did; it's very cool but that's not what I do." Go to Google and type in "Andy Warhol Effect," you'll find at least 150 hits and 20 websites telling you how to do it or someone that'll do it for you using image adjustments, threshold, then saturation and hue sliders. There, the secret is out; that's not how Warhol did it, but close enough for most people.

Writing this paper has been very difficult for me in a number of ways. First, I'm a huge procrastinator, and I've never been asked to write a paper like this. Second, writing is a lot harder than it looks. My writings are usually on-the-fly emails and angry "I want my money back" letters to eBay sellers. And third, the subject matter directly challenges me. While I love what I do, receive tons of positive feedback and have my new Sony HDTV as a result of my art business, I still fall prey to potshots from people who question the validity of "digital art." But something interesting happened through writing this paper that's moving me beyond paranoia and sour grapes. I'm realizing that I really do not need not to be ashamed of this newfound medium; I am, in fact, very proud of my "product," and the public has responded to me in a very positive way. I've decided why should try to hide the fact that my work is digital, and I've suddenly found myself saying "Yes, my art is 100% digital, starting from a digital photograph and made on a Macintosh," but I always add that it's not computer generated. I use the a hand held digital paintbrush to craft and work the image, and the most important tool of all are my eyes and my life experiences leading up to the choices I make on the screen. And I now can also add that for the last two years I have been one of the top 30 finalists in the Macworld Digital Art Contest, which is an international competition with over 500 entrants.

As I researched the stigma of digital art on the Internet, I came to find out that this topic is widely debated, and I found other artists who are also out to defend the medium. The stigma attached to the medium arises from the belief that many people think anyone can do it. In my research, one author asks if the great masters like Da

Vinci would be working in this same manner today. You *know* Andy Warhol would have assembled a team of super cool "art workers," and he'd be milking his Macs for all they're worth. Perhaps if he were around today, he would be a great positive force in helping to legitimize this new medium.

All this writing has lead me to the question, "So why does Robert McClintock use this medium?" It all leads back to my early days as a boy photographer. I think I was first attracted to the speed at which i could capture a moment or a scene. Then there was the excitement of having the film developed and the mystery of waiting a week and then looking at the pictures while still standing in the store. I naturally built a little B&W darkroom and the excitement was taken to another level, one of control and more intentional vision. The next step was making big prints and seeing the work become substantial. I remember the adrenalin I felt looking at the prints while they were still hanging to dry. I then stumbled into the instant Polaroid realm and became totally immersed in the SX70 process, first taking the picture, then watching it develop before my eyes and then scratching and pushing the hardening emulsion. Adding color and enlarging the images followed. Then digital happened, and I just jumped in, there was no big question of should I or shouldn't. The speed of the medium really did the trick for me. So I guess ultimately, my impatience led me this way, but the actual process itself is what continues to motivate me. It provides me with a high degree of speed and flexibility to accomplish my evolving vision. So more time is available for me to check out alternative possibilities and to create spin offs or derivatives of the original.

I'm truly flattered when people see the connection between my old Polaroids and my new digital work. I'm also able to see my consistant style of capturing a scene on camera, which helps me to realize that I have always been on the right track, and there is a distinct connection to what I'm doing now and my history as an artist and photographer. I tend to be very prolific in creating new work. My works are currently based on the familiarity of local cityscapes, and the unique personalities of cats and dogs. Lately in my work, I'm trying much harder not to over shoot a scene. Just because I can take 500 digital pictures doesn't mean I should. Believe me, 500 bad pictures are still 500 bad pictures. Admittedly, I am a "more is better guy," and I love the fact that I can shoot a lot of pictures for cheap, but then I have to edit them and store them on hard drives and DVDs, so there is a cost one way or the other.

In taking a hard look at debunking the stigma of digital art, I think I've come to realize that it really shouldn't matter how a picture is made. Even as a commercial photographer, I always said, "If it looks good, then it is good." It made little difference in the end if I used my Nikon or my Hasselblad, and only the techies would ever ask what f/stop I used. But it does matter to some people; and maybe it will ultimately help them to better understand the creative process and to appreciate the skill and thoughtfulness required to intentionally use digital processes to create art. Digital art is here to stay, and presents an exciting "new" medium that provides tremendous flexibility and possibility.

As digital imaging technology rockets ahead, it's impossible to ask the industry to only make themselves available to the professional community. The appeal to the mass market is inevitable and, in fact, vital. I guess, as with all things new, it will take time for the general public to understand and appreciate these new "tools" as tools, not as techniques or styles in themselves.

Seems we're all looking for ways to save time so we can do other more important stuff, but making art is important stuff. Art has always influenced culture, and the digital technology of creating and reproducing it is simply the only way I see for myself to expand further into the future. I'm overcoming the stigma through producing strong works of art that people easily relate to, so the medium really doesn't matter, and we all know that pioneers are never valued in the beginning. Digital technology has provided me with the level of control and flexibility to create unique new works, and I'm staying with it for a while until something better comes along and I jump on that bandwagon.

So, like the saw is to the carpenter, you still have to know how to use it if you're going to build a house.

Author Biography

Robert McClintock worked for over 15 years as a professional photographer in advertising and publishing. His work has covered almost all aspects of photography, both professionally and personally. He has always had a strong lean towards the fine arts and for many years McClintock's art work consisted of manipulated and hand colored SX70 Polaroid illustrations which have appeared in many national and regional magazines as well as galleries and shows in the northeast. In 1992 his work

was accepted into the prestigious International Polaroid Collection, a touring exhibit which features artists who use Polaroid products. Currently his works are being shown in the Polaroid Corporation show "American Perspectives" which premiered in Tokyo and now is in Boston at the Photographic Resource Center.

As digital photography emerged as a new medium McClintock became interested early on. He purchased his first digital camera in 1996 and quickly got to work. He immediately enjoyed the instant gratification the camera offered and found it offered him more creativity and spontaneity while shooting. He began taking his new digital camera everywhere with him, shooting every thing from people and things to sights in Washington, DC, Baltimore, New York City and San Francisco. His strong composition skills learned as a commercial photographer go a long way in making a great image. Since January 1999 he has shot over 10,000 digital pictures and created about 300 new Photo-Digital Illustrations. His experience with Photoshop was not extensive but he learned quickly and after many hours of experimenting at the computer he developed this distinct and new style wherein each image is worked on inch by inch as a traditional painter would do.

McClintock who had become somewhat frustrated with conventional photography now has created a new hybrid of photography and painting arriving at a unique new look and technique.

Robert was born in Brattleboro, Vermont and currently lives with his wife Susan and their 4 cats in Charles Village in Baltimore, Maryland.

Robert has become well known for his scenes of Baltimore and in December 2002 Robert opened his studio/gallery at 50 East Cross St in Baltimore's Federal Hill neighborhood.