

JD Jarvis Interviews Gerhard Mantz 2011

JD Jarvis interviews Gerhard Mantz, whose has embraced abstraction. According to Mantz in the following article Germany's interest in abstract art has grown. The following "conversation" between Jarvis and Mantz was sent to me by JD Jarvis and am honored to feature it here on Digital BrushStrokes.

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I met Gerhard Mantz several years ago in Barcelona during a series of soirees hosted by Hewlett-Packard to mark the unveiling of a new line of their wide format, fine art inkjet printers. At that time, I became familiar with his digital landscapes, which he has been successfully marketing as large digital prints on canvas stretched and displayed in a traditional painterly manner. Since then, we keep in touch via e-mail which is how I received a notice of an April 1st opening to an exhibition of his "Abstract" work at Galerie Heike Strelow in Frankfurt, Germany. This apparent sea change in his work prompted me to contact him again with some questions about this current exhibition, as well as, some other issues around digital art markets and with some hopes of gaining a bit of insight into his success. The following is a compilation of that conversation which went on for several weeks and, as you will see, asks as many questions as it answers.

JD: That was a very nice article that Rory MacLean wrote about you for the Goethe Institute blog. At that time he was discussing the evolution of your landscape work through various environments...oceans, rivers, air etc. and you were mentioning the abstract underpinnings for all this work. Now, less than a year later you have an exhibition of work that is most straightforwardly abstract. In your opinion, what changes have occurred since that article was posted in October of 2010, that now brings that abstract work forward?

GM: I was working for 10 years on abstract pictures and animations ("Infinite Image Productions"). These works were only acknowledged by a very small group of people. Even though published on my website I kept it in the background recently, not deliberately but because I could not find someone to show it. In Germany the acceptance of abstraction has grown immensely in the art scene over the last 2 or 3 years. So my Frankfurt Gallery suddenly was interested. This does not mean I stopped working on landscapes. For me the basic approach is the same: Computer-generated random within the framework of orderly structures and rules are giving enough unpredictability to be interesting as well as enough order to be beautiful. (I know it is uncool to use the term random or beauty, I wish I had better ones.) In the Abstractions I apply Perlin Noise (well you see that) to produce form and color and in the Landscapes noises are represented by terrains or by the manner in which plants and other vegetation are distributed.

My animations are completely generative; while I participate a great deal in the actual generating process myself for the still images. So you could call it hybrid-generative.

JD: I am immediately interested in your observation that Abstraction has gained some attention in Germany recently. Do you have any ideas about why that has come about? How about digital art in general? Is there an increased appreciation for art made digitally or does that not matter as much as what the art looks like?

GM: Abstraction has become a topic for younger artists. They rediscovered doing art for art's sake. Also there has been too much hype around painting that must tell a story and people became tired of it. Successes of artists like Tomma Abts or Mary Heilman have been signals for Germany too. I don't see any progress in acceptance of Digital Art though. It is mainly painting. Digital artists are often too occupied concentrating on technical aspects and not caring about what the art actually looks like or how it can affect the viewer.

JD: You have stuck with the description of yourself and the work as being "painting." I could see where it would be a temptation to describe what you do, particularly with the landscape work, as a new kind of virtual photographer. Meaning that you first create a virtual environment and then set your rendering camera at a particular "place" inside this environment and bring back the results. Is "painting" a

convenient term or do you have other reasons for holding to that label.

GM: You are right. Painting is not the right term for my way of production. I do not paint, right? I am rather a virtual photographer and I do not use a digital brush and I do not make it look as if it were painted. Still you could look at the final print as if it were a painting. The same criteria can be applied in viewing and evaluation.

JD: I agree and believe that even photography (except for, perhaps, photo-journalism) itself comes under these criteria at the point that it is displayed as art. If you look at "painting" stripped of all other concerns it becomes "mark making"... creating a mark or smudge on a surface. First, Photography and now, Digital Painting is different from traditional painting only in the philosophical questions it poses in terms of lack of materiality, new or unfamiliar tools and, perhaps, a new exploratory approach offered by working digitally.

GM: For me the process of making art with computers involves quite some philosophical questions and touches taboos that are worth thinking about. But, what final draws attention to an artwork is the image and its content and story regardless of the technique.

JD: The philosophical questions are many and they are interesting. How much making art digitally touches on taboos is only a problem to the degree that it gets in the way of people looking at and enjoying the art. It seems to me that people like to look at digital art, but there are some special obstacles that need attention when it comes to selling the work. Being a professional artist means you have to deal with more than just the creation of art work, but also in the marketing of it. For example, I find it ironic that the challenge for traditional printmakers was to create an edition of work that remained consistent in quality from first to last print. This machine-like consistency was the hallmark of a master printmaker. That is; until digital printing came along. Now, the art markets have changed their tune and place value on the handmade and the accidental variations that occur in traditional printmaking. Now that the digital printmaker can assure repeatable and consistent quality it is no longer as important. What do you make of this?

GM: That is certainly right, but quite natural. Abundance lowers the value.

One problem in digital art is, there seems no limitation in the number of works an artist can produce. This is inflationary. Better publish only limited numbers and keep it elite.

Talking with viewers there is always the topic of print on canvas. Is this traditional painting ground the right material for digital output? Can something so technically advanced and immaterial be presented on such an old-fashioned medium? "Yes," because it is still a painting. "No," it should stay on screens, projection walls or at least behind cold acrylic glass.

For me it is crucial for the work to become materialized as a physical object, which stays as it is. This tells the art buyer, "Yes I am like I am. I am final and all my parts are in place where they should be, no matter what random process has lead to my realization. Another reason for this topic to come up is that print on canvas is rarely found in Art. It is merely a domain of cheap and superficial imagery you buy at IKEA.

JD: How do you overcome this "IKEA connection"? While it may not pose a problem as far as the image goes, does this affect the marketing of your digital paintings in anyway? Do you promote the idea that your work is created digitally or do you (or your agent) play that down?

GM: Sure, sometimes I hear the exclamation; "Oh this is wonderful if only it were painted!" Unfortunately the question of how is this work made, if not painted, always comes and I do not lie on the subject. Some think it just needs a mouse-click and the computer has done the work. But, the main reason why digital art is rarely accepted in the art-world is that it is still mainly a domain of hobbyist artists and the artistic quality and intelligence is generally low. If you google "digital art" what you get in 99% of your hits is cliché and lacks reflection. In my opinion that is the reason and not the reproduction issue.

Compared to painting digital production has the disadvantage to be nontransparent to the viewer. Everybody learned as a child to paint and assemble and at least has an idea of how a painting is made

and what are the difficulties. Digital production lays in the dark between a mouse-click and the screen. For me and my production the digital tools are crucial. For the viewer they are not, at least not in the first place. What counts is the result. Most people don't think twice about how Cameron's "Avatar" was produced. As printing on canvas becomes more and more common in the art-market, it will lose its "cheap-art" connotations.

JD: How much does it matter that you meet the art buyer personally? Do you make more sales from the gallery walls or from the web?

GM: I make no sales through web at all. Sometimes there is a request through my website, but these people expect prices in the range of mass production posters. Still a website is used as reference, information and memory and helps being seen. It is more important today than printed matter because of instant and updated content. My Galleries never sold my work only through the Internet. An exception is LUMAS with reasonable priced high edition prints. They invest a lot in advertising and still selling more through their stores.

As digitally working artists we are used to ignoring the gap between screen and actual print. When we conceive an image on the screen we know how it will look in print. For our customers there is a huge difference. For them only the print is the real thing. They are way more impressed by the material thing.

JD: Lately, several companies have come into operation offering artists a means of tagging and tracing artwork in order to prevent counterfeiting, accumulate a provenance and even track market history. How do you handle the task of authentication for your clients? Does creating work digitally increase your awareness or concern about this matter?

GM: Buyers have gotten used to Photography as art for quite some time. As long as the work is materialized there is no difference to other artwork. Once it is signed it is original. It can't be resold in an auction without signature. That applies to DVD or hard drive as well. I don't see a problem. You can copy it but then it is a reproduction. That is my personal opinion. Tell me what you think.

JD: I think, with a few exceptions, it is hard to get people to be able to distinguish between a digital original and a reproduction. Since the techniques for making both the original and reproduction print are identical it becomes a matter of the method used to create the image file that becomes important. Again, very few people know the difference between a "captured" image and one that is originally composed in the computer system and many seemed bothered to have to deal with this sort of question at all.

While I think it goes counter to the purpose and capabilities of digital technology to limit our ideas of art and art marketing to those traditions that existed before digital art making tools, I clearly see how this could ultimately destroy contemporary art markets all together. For example, one can take an original digital file and create edition after edition of that image, each edition a perfect original but at different sizes or printed on different materials. Or, one could offer a file for downloading and let the person who purchased that download print the image themselves. While these practices fit the capabilities of the digital system, it would upset many traditional art-marketing practices and probably drive those buyers away.

Is this the difference between the old and the new? The new folks seem to feel that anything available on the web ought to be free? The old seem to feel that price and exclusivity determine the value of the art. In one scenario the art could be wildly popular and yet unable to sustain the artist in any way. In the other camp, digital art is not exclusive enough to warrant real value?

GM: I don't see these "new folks" in the art-market. Only information about art has become free of charge through Internet. Same in the stock-market, but still you pay for shares. In the art-market the most popular art is not the one that gets most attention in media. Attention correlates directly with sales, the attention of possible buyers and the in-group of the art-scene - "folks" won't count.

Real art will never be wildly popular. Just look at one of the art portfolios on the web open to everyone; like Saachi-Online. Every now and then there are competitions and the jury is the public, everybody can vote.

Now look at the winners! Popular is always the lowest common denominator. Better bring people to the art instead of bringing the art to people.

JD: Both in terms of the compositional process and in the final images we present to an often bewildered public; constructing or pulling together "beauty" (we can also say "order"...or "meaning") out of randomness is something a lot of digital artists share.

GM: Here you go. I think that procedure is quite common. Don't you work like that as well?

JD: I am working on a series of images that are based on random selections of seed images and settings within a plug-in called KPT Scatter. In keeping with shamanistic procedures I take this basic image generated by tossing dice and add my own manipulations and interpretations to come up with a "prophetic" artwork. I call this series "Divinations." What about the enhanced role that randomness seems to play in the creation of digital art?

GM: This is basically the method I use for my work too. The role randomness plays in creativity is certainly crucial. The human mind works similarly. Very often our input information through perception together with memory is not sufficient to make a clear and logical decision. In order not to stop the mind from working at that point a random decision is made and thinking can go on. The nature of our brain cannot afford to break down or crash like a computer and action is necessary. The placeholder for missing information is randomness. Usually we call that "intuition," we even believe we can see the future.

In computer programs we can simulate this method and we can research artistic creation by comparing the results. I also find that randomness often leads to combinations off the track of my regular imagination and leading beyond my habit-narrowed mind tracks. The main problem in this method is the arbitrariness. We try to solve this by adjusting the composition "manually." I think it is order that drives away arbitrariness. How would you describe the difference in the way you work?

JD: One big difference is that I no longer make preparatory sketches. It seems that as my digital work has evolved over the years, chance and exploration have taken over from planning and preparation. So, considering the non-destructive and infinitely open-ended nature of working digitally, is our perception or appreciation of the art changed? With digital output it seems we have to adopt printmaking paradigms to manufacture or enhance the "precious" nature of our work by manipulating scarcity or finding some other way to convey the idea of uniqueness. Size, for example. Any comments on this?

GM: The seduction to widen the range of your style is very strong given the various means of image manipulation with the computer. I myself often surrender. For the market, on the other hand, it is better to stick to branding and stay within a small range of style or theme. Public memory of your work builds up with repetition. People won't talk about your work if they can't remember it. To stick to a style is simple; just repeat yourself over and over. Run in your tracks again and again, habituation is the trick.

JD: How big of a file do you normally work with? Do you do your own printing and stretching of the canvas? What is the normal size of your finished canvases? Do you coat the finished print?

GM: My file sizes for prints are 16000 x 10000 pix. The biggest size I print is 140 x 300 cm (approx. 4.5 feet X 9 feet) on my Epson 11880. I do the stretching and do not put a finishing coating on the canvas.

JD: This is a fairly large piece. How did you come to decide on this size?

GM: A big size is stronger and more impressive, and a dealer puts the same effort into convincing a customer to purchase a small picture as for a big painting, but gets more money. On balance I earn more through selling big pictures.

JD: How is your abstract work similar to the landscapes... not just in technique but I'd be interested to hear what you might have to say about the image and how it connects to the person viewing the various works.

GM: I start out with a selection of elements from my library, a collection of form elements or previously saved terrains, plants, atmospheres. When I feel there is a direction the image wants to go I follow that, enhancing the effect by altering or replacing the elements, until a strong atmosphere is established. Now I let the work alone and work on others. Every now and then I open the file again and enhance a little more. I save intermediate states, thus getting hundreds of files. To limit the possibilities I often browse them and delete what I don't like.

A sculptor once was asked, "Master, how do you manage to make such a lively lion out of marble?" "That is very simple," he answered, "I take a block of stone and chisel everything off that does not look like a lion."

JD: So, we go back and forth between bending the image to our will and bending our will to what seems possible at the time. Without a lion to guide us, what is it exactly that defines your work (in particular the abstractions)? Also, what qualities do you look for in working with an image that moves your work from representational landscape to the more personal and haunting impressions that your landscapes convey to the viewer? How do you do that?

GM: Well this lion is a fugitive thing. I rather feel the knowledge about it and I see the lion in my intuition. It certainly exists, sometimes blurry, but if I stray from the right path I can feel it. Some artists say it is the work itself that guides you to its final result, just listen for its voice.

JD: The exhibition of your Abstractions has been up for several weeks since we began this discussion, how was the exhibition received? Have you made any sales of your abstract work?

GM: The exhibition was well received as far as I understand. In any case it looked quite powerful and I was pleased with the presentation. Apparently there will be some, not many, sales in the wake.

JD: Thank you, Gerhard, for answering my rather prying questions. I know it is considered impolite to ask someone about their sales but I wanted this conversation to be an intimate look at what professional artists do and think about. So, here is a final question...Why work digitally? Any parting comments as to what working digitally has done for you or how it has affected your work?

GM: Working digitally means having numerous variations that can come together in no time and lead to a final work. This gives the artist time to adjust and fine-tune a composition, thus providing more certainty of having found the right track and not having missed a better solution that could be found by following what might otherwise be considered a sidetrack. Working with databases brings a great deal of consciousness and overview and extends my thoughts and my memory.

I can understand how to earn money with art preoccupies one's thoughts. It is also crucial for me since I make my living from sales, but it is a rather inferior question for art lovers. Our main goal should be to go our own way in the tracks of our art and try to be as true and consequent in our work as possible.

To find out more about the artwork of Gerhard Mantz, please follow these links:
www.gerhard-mantz.de