

## Digital Blindness and the End of Painting :Judith Wright at Galerie Dusseldorf

Digital imagery, like all codes and classical languages, is more darkness than light. It offers no revelations, nothing for the imagination to explore. Behind the grid of pixels which cover the screen in front of me [and you] there is nothing at all, absolute darkness with no dithering or dwindling. Digital imagery has no recall. Most importantly it holds no trace of any previous state, no memory of the origin or emergence of what one sees. Seeing this is an uncomfortable experience. It can lead to cumulative spiritual distress, like standing on the edge of precipice for a long time. The absolute absence, so close, by seeps slowly into one's consciousness creating a universal sign, or better remaking the universe as a single sign. Some will feel a compulsion to fill the empty space with their presence, to plunge into the void. There is nowhere to fall. They will disappear, smeared across the screen.

Nearly everyone who uses a digital screen will accept voluntary blindness without resistance. They will agree that what cannot be seen in the pixels has never been, thereby severing themselves from most visual experience. Not that self-invited blindness is restricted to electronics. Drawing has often been likened to the act of a blind man describing the world in system of touches, a series of landmarks outcrops of presence and absence, across a completely empty field. In his *Memoirs of the Blind* Derrida wrote at length on the link between memory and blindness in the visual arts and literature, on the problem of "seeing between" the inflections of code

— the difference between believing and seeing, between believing one sees and seeing between, catching a glimpse — or not . Before doubt ever becomes a system skepsis has to do with the eyes. The word refers to a visual perception to the observation vigilance and attention of the gaze during an examination. One is on the lookout one reflects on what one sees by delaying the moment of conclusions. Keeping the thing in sight one keeps on looking at it.—

Derrida: *Memoirs of the Blind*

One can only keep looking if there is some territory to explore, some trace or track to follow. This a strategy of the blind, akin to touching, the eye feels for relationships, gradients, eroded edges, hard corners, soft yielding curves. It maps the image before it against previous experience. But imagine that it only touched identical small metal balls, with nothing between them, no landscape, no history. Soon the eye surrenders the search in this visual universe, there can be no doubt, in this universe there is only absence or presence, forever.

That, roughly speaking, is the difference between digital imagery and other kinds of artificial image. Drawing, paintings, photographs all invite interrogation, all seduce us

to 'see between' that which is given. Monet's deliciously shaped and inflected brush marks, for instance, are about history and memory they invoke the unseen at every glance. In black and white photography, grain and stain always stand at some point on infinite staircase of scale and tone. Not only is digital imagery uniform in every possible way it also lacks any positive ground or medium to establish a territory for the eye to explore.

For artists at least digital imagery poses profound ontological problems. It is very difficult, if not impossible for an artist to engage the digital field in the way artists have dealt with all other media. A strong account of this process insists that all art works in some sense map or the human body. One might, very cautiously, suggest that digital imagery can never become art solely on its own terms. It may even be that we are in the middle of a profound crisis of vision and memory, of which art is but a small part. Digitalization may be the ultimate stage of the loss of affect, [of manifest human presence in the universe], before technology. However brightly it may glow, we are entering a world entirely composed of grey fog.

Judith Wright works across digital and non digital media, so as to heighten this dilemma. In her large unframed paintings, chalky grey, lemon and very fugitive pink, but wrinkled, surfaces blossom into soft edged, territories that melt into each other. These images with centres but no periphery are the quintessence of the tactile eye, the blind man's buff vision that charts from hot to cold and back again. Small wonder they are almost erotic, sensuality at its extreme dawn. Each curved territory resonates with the actions which made it a sublime scale of tones, a gesture which leads the eye ever further into the event.

Her two video works *Blind of Sight II* and *III* propose a different response. Both are close up views of a human moment a gesture – a baby on the breast, a woman wiping her hand across her face. Their emphasis on a minor human event suggests that they could be no more an echo of the work of Andy Warhol, Dennis Oppenheim or Bruce Naumann.

The presentation of the baby on the breast, as a metaphor for the early stabilisation of one's relation to the world also has a long history. The theorist and critic Adrian Stokes borrowed from gestalt psychology to suggest that the baby's act of grasping the breast, the search for nourishment produced the first human experience of a territory separated from the rest of the universe – a territory with an all important centre and no periphery. The withdrawal of the breast precipitated a formal epiphany – the world is ordered into beneficial and hostile spaces. This was a tactile experience but it modeled all subsequent visual interactions, as the developing personality was able to engage the surrounding territories by mapping their differences and remembering them as past events and experiences

Wright's DVD seeks to reenact those moments, through the inherent irresolution of digital images. Soft focus seas of pixels twist and turn on the edge of becoming a baby's face. This lifts the pain of digital imagery to the pain of becoming itself, the unbearable drama of origin. Even so the problem remains. There are no more 'clouds of glory' to attend our arrival on earth, a sea of pixels is a mere handful of dust, scattered fitfully through a vacuum.

If the digital media are ever to produce a convincing passionate art, artists must find way to leave traces within them, allow them to embody experience and memory. Collage and montage appear to promise a partial solution but in practice their use as a strategy seems to accelerate the decay of the trace. There is no friction in a digital universe. Folding one event against another raises similar problems creases, demarcation lines vanish in the code.

The most promising solution so far, lies in multi-media. developing a proliferating range of sources each with their own memory traces already established eg details of paintings, printed books, broadcast tv, video, scanners even Leonardo da Vinci's stains on the wall. Then the digital medium could deal with the image solely as image and avoid questions of presence, origin and traces. Perhaps the resistant wrinkles in Wright paintings, manifestations of the inherent materiality, the resistance of their support are showing the best way to go.