

En Plein Écran

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During the late 19th Century, Impressionism was born partly out of an anxiety caused by the introduction of new technologies. Technology such as photography and the printing press threatened to replace painting and revolutionise image making. They did not quite replace painting but did however revolutionise how we would share our information, our lived experience and interact with our inter-personal and natural environment. Back then, the Impressionists were more concerned with the process of image making, steeped in the tradition of painting for millennia. Now we face different challenges posed by new technology.

The early 1900s saw painting evolve in the face of a certain doom that the camera threatened. The invention of tubed paint and light-weight, portable easels helped coerce the painter outside of the studio and into the open environment. The term "plein air painting" describes the process of painting outside in the elements, where painters were forced to learn to work with nature. This move into the open also found Impressionist painters questioning the legacy of the subject itself, focusing more on capturing an emotional connection with paint through the functional exploration of material, light, form and process. Perhaps being out of the confinement of the studio enabled painters to use the medium as a tool to represent the essence of natural phenomena rather than to recreate illusory imitations of nature. Decades of this experimental painting paved the way for Modernism in the early to mid 20th Century - an era where process and material dominated painting as the primary subject matter.

In 2020, we face a new technological anxiety but not the same one faced or predicted a century ago. Painting has been far from replaced. Instead, it is now more prolific than ever, shared with ease via platforms enabled by digital technologies. And while social media has opened the doors for us to connect on a global scale, the interactions we are establishing with nature, and each other, are increasingly virtual; separating us from physical experience via the glass plane of the screen. The exhibition title "En Plein Écran" is a play on the term "en plein air", coined by the Impressionists when they moved their studios to the outdoors to connect with the environment in a way the camera could not. "En Plein Écran" translates to "in full screen", referring to our new found dependence on screen-based technology to inform a majority of what we see and how we experience subject matter. 19th Century advancements in technology pushed the Impressionists' to a new found freedom. Venturing into the great outdoors helped them form a relationship between the natural environment and the creator, image and viewer. They could not have predicted that over one hundred years later people would face a greater sense of physical separation and isolation, compounded by the lockdowns of the COVID-19 virus.

My most recent series of paintings focus on the change that digital technology is having on image creation, post-production and distribution. The paintings also examine our interpretation of medium and material in a time when screens are the dominant form of visual communication.

While on residency in 2018 at Fogo Island, Newfoundland, I had the chance to make work in a part of the world renowned for its natural phenomena and geographical isolation. Though I was not equipped with the same studio luxuries that I was accustomed in my home city, the lack of digital connectivity helped me form a relationship more in tune with the surrounding environment. Much like the Impressionist painters over a century ago, I improvised new processes and utilised materials that I found while exploring the landscape. Traversing the land to find materials for the studio helped me to form a stronger connection to the natural world rather than my digital one. Though my aesthetic output is always strongly connected with the screen, the residency opened a new inquisition into the organic elements of medium and pigment, as well as the impressions my gestures would leave in my compounds. The paintings were becoming more synonymous with the landscape and my marks left in the mediums presented a metaphorical similarity with the broader footprint of technology on our natural environment.

Two major new series were born out of my residency in Newfoundland - the Oxide series and the Nature series. Although different in almost every aspect of process and output, both series are bound by a thematic cornerstone anchored in nature.

The Oxide series directly resulted from my use of materials found in the surrounding landscape while on residency. Although I am currently not using timber and soil from Fogo Island, the Oxide paintings utilise iron oxide mined in the Western region of Australia. The material is used as a pigment that directly changes the composition of my signature compound medium. The oxides highlight the gestures in my compound and give the paintings a greater material weight to which my pigments are atomised. This in turn strengthens my acrylic layers and heightens the saturation of the screen-like hues. The iron oxide I source is also produced for mass consumption as a direct result from our greater technological boom over the last Century. Mining is one of our major physical footprints on nature, now used more than ever to build and power our digital devices. The increased ferocity of the gestures in these Oxide paintings could speak directly to the same marks left in our landscape by our ever-increasing technological industry.

The Nature series is a directly visual exploration of the natural environment as observed through our increased screen-based relationship to the outside world. This series is propelled by the use of cutting-edge digital photo editing and printing processes, which in turn are "misused" in these works to connect, or disconnect, digital media with the physical process of painting. It is a 21st Century examination of painting similar to that of Impressionist and Modernist exploration of medium and process in the face of mechanical reproduction in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

In these paintings, I scan through online databases to source individual digital "bits" of nature, such as stock images of leaves, branches and bark, which have either been isolated from photographs as PNG files or completely 3D rendered. Using software, I arrange a montage of these individual pieces to create a detailed, completely fictional landscape. The final image seems to mimic nature as we would capture it in a photograph but with enough unnatural oddities so as to leave the viewer with an uneasy feeling of falsity. The image is then printed on large scale plastic polymer sheets and using a customised chemical process, I fuse the image to layers of paint already applied to the canvas. This application is unpredictable and unstable, often dictated by factors such as air temperature or humidity. The image often breaks apart during the chemical reaction, leaving us with echoes of the digital image and a sense of painterly gesture, similar to that of Impressionist painting.

As with most of my studio experimentation over the last decade, the binding factors that merges these two series together are material, process and digital imaging. A common thread in my work demonstrates these as being the conduit between our physical and virtual experience. Though the subject matter in the two series in this exhibition is completely different in appearance, the works share a connection with the natural world through the act of painting. The works echo an homage to Impressionism and Modernism. However, in an age where screens dominate the visual landscape, these paintings review our new visual technologies and posit that these technologies may be separating us from physical experience altogether, and thus distancing us from engaging with nature and the natural environment. These paintings are produced with the hope that they may highlight an innate human desire for the intimacy of engaging with art and nature in-person and that this desire will always remain in our collective conscious.