Drawing in a Digital World: 
A self-reflective critical analysis of the creative output of John Roome.

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Abstract 
The paper will adopt a reflective approach to my practice as a fine artist, exploring the interface between "new" and "old" technologies. I will provide a brief historical context by referring to the work of selected artists who work at the interface between "new" and "old" media. I will trace my creative process in making a body of works which used computer drawings as a starting point. The influence of the "new" technology of computer drawing on the "old" technology of woodcut will be examined in relation to my creative process. I will reflect on various critical responses to my work with a view to further developments.

*Journey into the Ineffable* (see figure 1) consists of two hand-carved wood panels and a digitally animated sequence of drawings which were projected onto one of the two panels. The work was presented as part of the Department of Fine Art and Jewellery Design Department staff exhibition titled New Connections at the KZNSA Gallery in 2009. The intention of this exhibition was to showcase the creative output of academic and support staff in the newly merged department. The exhibition was curated by Brenton Mart, Director of Exhibitions at the KZNSA Gallery. Final decisions regarding the positioning and presentation of the work were made by him.

![Figure 1: Journey into the Ineffable, John Roome, 2009. Digital animation and wood panels. Dimensions variable. Installation view, KZNSA Gallery.](image)

Firstly I need to place this particular work within the context of my own creative output to date. I have been working and exhibiting as a professional artist for over thirty years. During this period my interests have been focused on drawing, painting, printmaking and hand papermaking. I have used these media to explore my immediate environment, placing a strong emphasis on drawing as a means of engaging directly with my subject matter, but following this with a fairly indirect process of working. Although trained as a painter in the traditional medium of oil on canvas, I have constantly sought alternative means of expression through technical experimentation. My preoccupation with process led me to work with techniques such as "wash away" where the image was arrived at through a process of resist and layering. This relatively indirect and labour intensive process of working also applies to hand papermaking and printmaking. A series of multiple block colour woodcut prints enabled me to further explore the possibilities of indirect process. On reflection I have found that the meditative process of drawing directly from life is echoed by the technique used to transform the drawing. It is this process
of meditative observation, reinforced by a labour intensive, indirect technical means that characterises most of my work. In a sense the meaning or content of the work is directly expressed through the process.

My drawing media have always been the traditional ones of pencil or pen on paper. However, recently I began to explore the use of the computer as a drawing instrument. This was a natural development as a result of my lifelong fascination with technical experimentation. The experimentation with digital drawing also came out of an attempt to break a period of creative block. My initial approach in getting used to a new medium was playful. Drawing with a computer mouse felt awkward at first but once mastered, it allowed for a fairly fast and easy way of working. The ability to copy and paste and re-do at the click of the mouse was a revelation to me. I soon discovered that a series of slightly altered drawings could be converted into an animated sequence. It was thus almost unwittingly that I entered into the field of computer animation. Whilst I was fascinated by the possibilities of this medium I was frustrated by its purely virtual nature. Digital prints lack the physical richness of traditional media. For this reason I decided to translate some of my digital images into hand carved wood panels. I exhibited these wood panels and showed the digital animations alongside them. It then came to my mind to explore the possibilities of projecting an animated sequence directly onto the wood panel, thus completing the cycle of my process.

Figure 2: Journey into the Ineffable, John Roome, 2009. Still from animation projected onto wood panel.

Susan Buchan in an editorial for the journal Animation, stated

As technologies develop, artists not generally associated with the moving image are exploring animation and digital manipulation techniques, and there are growing numbers of artists whose work is unthinkable without the digital (Buchan, 2008: 107).

As an artist not generally associated with the moving image, I place myself within this category. Working digitally has provided me with a new visual vocabulary and a new way of working. As Buchan suggests there are many artists whose work would be unthinkable without the digital. But it is ironic that American photo realist painter Chuck Close is reported to have said “I absolutely hate technology, and I am computer illiterate, and I never use any labour saving devices...” (McCarthy, S. 2005). Despite this statement Close's work with its grid structure closely resembles the pixelated look of digital imagery. His images consist of hundreds of tiny squares which when viewed from a distance create a photographic image. Close's process involves interpreting a photographic image by means of hand drawn or painted marks organised according to a geometric grid. Although he expresses a dislike for computers, Close appears to be imitating the language of digital printing. It is this quality that attracts me to his work as I am also interested in imitating the computer in my wood panels. I do not share his dislike of technology; on the contrary I am fascinated by it. Whilst I do not consider myself to be computer illiterate I have limited knowledge of graphic software programmes such as Illustrator, Photoshop and Flash. Initially it was because of this lack of knowledge that I chose to use Microsoft Paint which is an easy to
use programme and available on most computers. I found that the limitations of this programme actually enhanced my work as it provided the raw and crude aesthetic which I desired. The aesthetic quality of the work I was able to produce matched that of the woodcut prints I had previously been making. I therefore made a conscious decision to continue using this programme. As Professor Ian Calder in his review of the exhibition remarked;

_Powerful imaging software is known to render often facile digital effects; Roome avowedly uses minimal computer tools to create his animated images. In self-consciously avoiding flair, the authority and potency of his autographic skills in observational drawing is expressed most cogently (2009)._*

The realisation that I could animate my computer drawings fairly easily came out of my initial desire to document my drawing process. This reminded me of the work of William Kentridge whose animated films developed out of a similar desire to document his drawing process. Kentridge began by making charcoal drawings on paper. As he made changes to the drawings these were documented on film. His films incorporate the effects of erasure and re-drawing of the original drawing. In this way the physical drawings are transformed into moving images on film. My process differs from his in that the initial drawings are virtual although in other ways the process is similar. The virtual drawings are copied; parts of them are erased and changed. In my process the virtual drawings are projected onto wood panels and translated into physical objects. Thus in a sense mine is a reversal of his process, whereby the virtual is translated into the physical. By projecting the video onto the carved wood panel I try to emphasise the relationship between static and moving images and between the virtual and the real.

The interface between the virtual and the real is explored in the work of Brazilian artist/researcher Guto Nobrega. In a live performance titled _Interface Concert_ Nobrega created his drawings, accompanied by live music which was composed specifically for the performance. Working on a computer drawing tablet he developed a drawing which was projected onto a screen. In other works he has explored the interaction between live performers and projected animations. This interface between digitally produced (virtual) elements, which are projected, and physical (real) elements is what fascinates me. I am also interested in the way digital aesthetics can interface with traditional media.

Figure 3: _Journey into the Ineffable_, John Roome, 2009. Sequential digital drawings.
The animated sequence for *Journey into the Ineffable* was produced by making approximately 300 individual drawings using Microsoft Paint and drawing with a computer mouse. The work started with a simple line drawing. Each drawing was copied and then altered or embellished. The transitions between each frame are relatively crude and the images of heads tend to "morph" considerably from frame to frame. (See figure 3). It is interesting that when watching the animation the eye tends to ignore these inconsistencies. As Norman MacLaren noted; *What happens between each frame is more important than what happens on each frame* (Solomon, 1987: 11). It is what we do not see that enables our brains to read the sequence. We want to believe that we are seeing the same head even though they are actually quite different.

![Figure 4: Work in progress showing traced digital drawing.](image)

The next step in my process was to create carved wood panels which I intended to exhibit together with the animation. I chose two of the drawings which I felt conveyed two different aspects of the series. The first image (figure 5) was of a single head which I felt had a relatively static quality. The image was projected onto a wooden board which had been painted white and was then traced onto the board using a pencil. I used wood cutting chisels to carve out the lines using only vertical and horizontal cutting. This was an extremely labour intensive process as, like Chuck Close, I tend to avoid labour saving devices. My intention was to create an image that makes reference to digital technology but is clearly handmade. Juliette Leeb duToit in her review of the exhibition made the following observation.

*The aged head that fragments as it is displaced in motion and space, is partly transcribed in the faceted marks associated with the pixellation (sic) of digital imagery together with more conventional striations that reflect the gesture of the artist’s hand in the animation and in the low relief. He engages in a subtle irony here, in which the computer generated marks, incised by hand, initiate a discursive on the interface between the man-made and technology. Roome is a master in various two-dimensional media, printmaking, linocut, woodcut and painting, and this facility is easily transcribed into the incising of pristine white gesso covered board (2009).*

Judging from Leeb du Toit’s remarks my intention to establish an interface between the digital and the manmade was successful. This is further substantiated by Ian Calder when he states:

*Responding to the pixelated (sic) qualities of digital images, Roome carves equivalent marks into two painted wood panels in representation of the faces in his animation. The resulting surfaces of his still images resemble a traditional linocut or woodcut: cut through a painted layer into the wood substrate, the directional strokes of his carving and chisel-marks render static the restlessness and agitated movements of his digital animation (2009).*

Calder’s reference to the static rendering of the agitated movements of the digital animation succinctly clarifies my intentions with this image. Whilst the image is static the agitated marks behind the head provide a record of the changes made during the animation process. In a sense this image contains the history of all the images that lead up to it.
Both Calder and Leeb du Toit make reference to pixels and pixellation. In my woodcut panels the marks are handmade or autographic but imitate the mechanical quality of computer pixels. In his article *The Art of the portrait, the Pixel and the Gene: Micro Construction of Macro Representation*, McCarthy (2005) makes the distinction between autographic and allographic mark-making. Autographic marks are handmade, each one being unique, whereas allographic marks are designed to be repeated in order to reproduce an image or artwork. Pixels fall into the category of allographic marks as they are mechanically produced and designed for endless reproduction. Original art works which consist of autographic marks can be translated by means of digital media into allographic marks (pixels) which allow for the image to be reproduced endlessly. What tends to happen as a result of this process is that all images reproduced in this way are reduced to a kind of "sameness". By starting with the digital process as a means of image generation and then translating the images into handmade artefacts, I am subverting the process. The originally allographic, mechanical marks become autographic and are "humanised". As Leeb du Toit remarks, this *initiate(s) a discursive on the interface between the man-made and technology* (2009).
The second image I chose to carve was one that clearly shows the transition from one image to another. I felt that it provided a record of my thought process. One image is in the process of disappearing and a new image is evolving. This also references the essentially visual and intuitive approach which I take. One image leads to another and there is no story-line or script. The image also contains a strong sense of movement. According to MacLaren; Animation is not the art of drawings that move, but rather the art of movements that are drawn (Solomon, 1987: 11).

It was the transitional nature of this image that prompted me to use it as the background on which to project the animated video. I found it interesting that some viewers did not realise that there was a carved image on the screen. So in effect the interface between the two became subliminal. The static, handmade image and the animated mechanically reproduced images were successfully synthesised.

Figure 7: Journey into the Ineffable, John Roome, 2009. Wood panel, 92.5 x 138.5 cm

Figure 8: Journey into the Ineffable, John Roome, 2009. Digital projection onto wood panel.
In describing the animation Calder noted that

Roome’s projected animation, ‘Journey into the Ineffable’ explores a digital form of pictorial narrative where, as he explains about his title, ‘words have no place.’ In a darkened room in the exhibition, Roome projects an animated series of numinous overlays of linear faces, vivid in their neon colours. This is the cerebral work of a mature artist, eager to take on fresh creative opportunities offered by digital media (2009).

His description of the work as a pictorial narrative affirms my intentions. As previously stated the work was not scripted and does not follow a linear or literal story line. I began by drawing a head which then led to variations of the first drawing. By erasing one image a new image began to emerge and I instinctively followed what was suggested by the process. Thus there was a strong element of chance and intuition. The process allowed for easy repetition of the drawings and this lead to the repetition of certain sequences. Thus a cyclical element began to emerge. I feel that the work expresses the repetitive and cyclical nature of life. The narrative, like life itself, takes unexpected turns but also reflects back on itself and returns to certain points only to make new departures.

As I have indicated, the critical response to my work was generally encouraging. Working with digital animation as a way of generating visual ideas seems to hold enormous potential. In addition the digital medium is an excellent means of recording and analysing my creative process. It is my intention to continue the “discursive on the interface between the man-made and technology” (Leeb du Toit: 2009). I intend to broaden this to the interface between humanity and technology.

Whilst the main strength of this work seems to lie in the transition of the digital images into woodcut panels, the potential of using other traditional media can be explored. I am currently developing a series of drawings that imitate the digital aesthetic. In these drawings I have used images gleaned from the internet as the starting point. These images are fairly low in resolution and therefore the pixellated quality is pronounced. I have used charcoal and pencil on paper to translate the images into autographic marks. In the charcoal drawings the character of the drawing medium re-enforces the autographic quality of the marks. I used a free-hand approach and the drawings, whilst maintaining their reference to the digital source, take on a distinctly organic character.

Figure 9: Sprout and Lung. John Roome, 2009. Charcoal on paper 70 x 50 cm.

Figure 10: Lung. John Roome, 2009. Pencil on paper. (In progress)
In the pencil drawing I adopted a more mechanical method. The page was divided into a mechanical grid and the image was translated almost pixel by pixel. This has resulted in a drawing which has strong mechanical feeling but retains the sense of being handmade. In this sense it is reminiscent of the work of Chuck Close.

The inspiration for this new series of drawings came from a news story gleaned over the internet. It is the story of a Russian man who was suspected of having a tumour in his lung. Doctors discovered that that a pine tree had sprouted in his lung and the pine needles were piercing the lung tissue causing him severe pain. This story struck me as being a metaphor for humanity’s relationship with nature. When searching for images of lungs and pine trees on the internet I found a remarkable similarity between the inside of the human lung and a forest. I was also reminded of the fact that the pixellation of the images enhanced any similarities they may have. The computer screen tends to emphasise "sameness" rather than difference. The work is still in progress and it is my intention to develop a digital animation on this theme. In this case my process will be the inverse of the one used in Journey into the Ineffable.

The journey that my work has taken me on has led me to engage with new technology in a creative way. In 1993 Stephen Wilson of San Francisco State University answered the question;

*How Can the Arts be Part of a Technological Era?*

> There is an acknowledged danger that technology is advancing much faster than the culture’s ability to make sense of it. The arts have traditionally been a place where understanding, integration and preparation for future developments takes place. There are several competing visions of how artists can most fruitfully work with emerging technologies: treat them as new media, deconstruct their cultural implications, or participate in the processes of invention and extension (Wilson: 1993).

Computer technology has become an almost unavoidable component of our everyday lives. Being part of a generation who did not grow up with computers, I regard this new technology with a sense of awe. I have to admit that I often struggle to make sense of it. Unlike Chuck Close who claims to absolutely hate technology, I am intrigued by what it can offer me as an artist. As I have shown, my interest is in using easily accessible computer technology as an interface with traditional media. I found that working on a computer provided me with creative stimulus and a means of generating new concepts. By exploring the interface between new and old technologies I believe that I can contribute to an understanding of how new technologies impact on the way we see and interact with the world. Drawing is not only a form of visual expression but it is also a means of gaining an understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Drawing in a digital world has broadened my understanding of how new technology can enhance my creative process.

**The Video**

*Journey to the Ineffable* can be viewed on YouTube at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqDABn2iphQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqDABn2iphQ)

**References**


