Internet Culture, Nature, and Fanart: A Year of Exploration in Technique and Inspiration

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A Year of Exploration in Technique and Inspiration

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Initial thoughts

When first considering my thesis research and possible approaches, I began by identifying my interests — video games, anime, and cartoons — hoping to create a comprehensive project based on these influences. I concluded that I ought to attempt to produce a type of final product that interests me, such as a game or an animation. At the same time I set myself to the task of consciously trying to avoid making art that focuses on a particular character or group of characters that I have previously included in a lot of my artwork. In particular, I intended to avoid “fan art” or anything that is too closely linked to my specific interests in recent years that draw from popular media franchises. My motivation to leave this preferred style of work behind was to challenge my ability to create something “unique” yet personal. By clinging to these ambitious objectives, I managed to produce a lot of art that I had not imagined attempting before during the first semester of research. However, I subsequently realized that I should feel comfortable producing the kinds of art reflective of my past work and interest in fan cultures.

My previous work has been inspired by internet fandoms that celebrate the things I have always liked such as children’s cartoons, movies, and video games. I first became involved in digital artwork in 2005, because I wanted to share my love for the Pokemon Game Boy series with other fans. This pursuit introduced me to many other artists whom I had admired in related fandoms, and on whose work I based my art styles. Over the past few years, I would say that I have “come full circle,” as I am now able to sell my artwork in person at fan conventions where people gather en masse to celebrate their favorite anime and cartoons. Consequently, when
producing my artwork, I do so both with my own interest and with this specific audience in mind. From my experience in this world of fan art, I am well aware that part of being a fan is the interest in seeing a favorite character represented in such a familiar way, as though each picture is a personal tribute.

Images of past fanart work:

Top left: Merengue, 2014. Photoshop
Top right: Flitter & Cloudchaser, 2014. Photoshop
Bottom: Fluttershy, 2013. Photoshop and graphite on paper
First approaches

Prior to exploring new ways of creating art for my thesis, my typical method had generally involved illustrating a character in a scene or space. In my early approach to try something different, I borrowed bits and pieces from subjects and techniques that inspire me and wove them together, which resulted in choppy vignettes. I sampled from sprites and color palettes from my favorite childhood Nintendo Game Boy games: Metroid: Return of Samus, Yoshi’s Island, and Pokemon Silver. I also created some watercolor textures for use in my digital work. The use of watercolor textures over digital artwork was a technique that I learned several years ago from a fellow artist that I met on the internet – we actually met through our love of the game Yoshi’s Island, for which we were both making a great deal of fanart at the time. As a result, I have been experimenting with traditional textures for years exclusively for the purpose of enhancing my digital work. Other techniques I used in these early attempts were based on traditional printmaking methods, such as pronto plates or stone lithography. After I had gathered all these elements together in Photoshop, I wove them together to create the scenes I had in mind. As part of this process, I was also exploring the process of making art as fast as possible, which is not a mode I usually work in—most of my digital “paintings” take many hours of effort over many days, and go through multiple stages of deliberation and revision. Some suggestions from my professors as well as my own intuition led me to believe that working rapidly would free me from a dependence on strategies I have used in the past and could lend itself to my discovering new approaches to making art.
In this mode of working, my work became noticeably flat. This likely occurred because I was trying to avoid my typical rounded, shaded characters, and also may have been a result of working with a lot of pixel and vector designs. Also, for many of the designs, colors and patterns I was creating at the time, I drew inspiration from otaku and internet culture fashion trends — which lately are characterized by flat, smooth lines and patches of color, logos, and the occasional gradients, and which styles are often very simple and reminiscent of the early 90s. These trends are clearly targeting people in my generation — embodying the “feel” of the ‘90s — as seen by references to ‘90s toys, video games, and fashions. Most of these online boutiques feature similar items — Sailor Moon inspired outfits, T-shirts with scattered patterns of Kid Pix tool sprites, and My Neighbor Totoro stockings, to name a few currently popular styles. The colors tend to be soft, de-saturated pastels, as if they have aged somewhat, perhaps to evoke a sense of nostalgia. Whether or not I realized it at the time, I was responding to these trends with
the flat designs that I was producing in the initial stages of my work. This mode of working was instructive in some ways, as it allowed me to work much more quickly than usual, and subsequently, I produced much more artwork than I expected. Looking back, I think I was drawn to these cultural fashion trends because they were a way that people could publicly reflect their otaku or gamer interests, without necessarily referencing anything directly — which in a sense was what I was trying to do with my little digital pieces.

After working with these flat textures initially, I began to incorporate some elements of my previous style, such as including characters — a shift that allowed me to feel more enthusiastic and confident about my artwork. For additional subject matter, I decided to include a variation on a “character” who often shows up in my sketchbook-- a rounded fish (inspired by ranchu goldfish) that first cropped up in my work in the fall of 2013. This fish appeared in more than half of my studies and works within the first few months of my first semester of art production. Since many of my flat textures seemed to look like landscapes or empty spaces, I began to fill them with variations of this fat fish. Initially I felt conflicted about this change, because I felt that I was failing to adhere to my intention to stay away from fanart-style work. However, I ultimately believe it was a good choice to return to working with characters, as I became more motivated and comfortable with the art-making process.
Top left: Yarn fish, 2014. Photoshop & print
Top right: More fish, 2014. Photoshop
Bottom: Notebook birds, 2014. Photoshop
Post-critique

During my first critique in the fall, it was suggested that my artwork had noticeably commercial qualities -- a comment that was not unexpected. There were also many observations regarding my use of compositions and space in my pictures, rather than on the actual scenes and objects I tried to depict or characters represented – the area where I tend to put most of my thought. Lastly, I received a suggestion to explore processing my work repeatedly, by bringing artwork from the studio to the computer and back again.

Considering the comment regarding commercial qualities, I feel that this characteristic of much of my artwork is a consequence of my working in an area that I am excited to participate in and explore — whether by creating postcards, buttons and stickers—which is art that tends to be created in a more intimate scale. None of these works that I create are very large, and often they are for personal home use, or bought as small gifts for friends. Even my largest prints, which are around 11 x 17, are still intended for a domestic scale — someone once commented on my “Apodiform” hummingbird print, and said that she would love to have it on her bathroom wall. In my opinion, this is high praise. As such, I decided not to endeavor to make my artwork on a more grand “commercial” scale — and I think that the small size of my artwork (and the trinkets to which it could possibly lend itself) lends it a unique, charming quality. The art that I create is meant to be something personal and portable, as if belonging in one’s dorm room, if the form of the artwork were physical and not digital.

In the digital sense, my artwork is also intended for a more intimate setting. I tend to make my artwork only large enough to serve as someone’s desktop display if they so desire—
and this does, in fact, seem to be the case. I have met strangers at conventions who will walk up to me and mention that they have been using my artwork as their desktop background, or phone background, for months, without knowing where they found it online.

With regard to the thoughts on composition and use of space during the critique, I realized that, based on my own experience, I always consider a subject character or object in the image over anything else. This focus on the character means that I have not always considered the most effective use of composition in my images — for example, I might not activated all the spaces equally in an image. This realization was useful in that it allowed me to step back and consider space more fundamentally. In terms of scale, I may have had a tendency not to consider the physical dimensions of my artwork because most of it would live on the computer — I always assumed that I could change its size and form to fit any website I where I would want to share it. Thanks to the scale observations made during the critique, it was easier to consider the significance of scale in my artwork as I continued.

Second half of first semester

During the second half of the semester, I already had a lot of images and textures I was using in my work, but I had been sticking primarily to media I was familiar with — Photoshop, pronto plates and stone lithography. While spending time considering the suggestion to try to process my artwork even further, I investigated some new methods by which I could do so. I used some materials that I had not experimented with before, such as vinyl stickers, laser cut woodblock and copper plate textures. I attempted making prints using vinyl stickers though these efforts
usually just produced ripped papers. My laser cutting efforts, similarly, were only partially successful — I did not realize that the laser cut design should be passed over the wood a few times to make the impression deep enough. As a result, the prints from this matrix all contained some spots where the design filled in with ink. I scanned most of these in and ended up vectorizing the design and using it in many other studies (this block created the “Fish Pile” image) so it was actually quite useful. Even the original filled-in prints created some attractive traditional textures that I wove into many of my small digital studies. As for the copper plate, my favorite textures came not from the etching work I had done on the plate, but rather from the wiped texture of the plate, and the patches where ink remained due to unintentional foul biting. Another thing that I found makes wonderful textures is the plate itself, with all its beautiful colors from oxidation. I found that these textures worked admirably to add a new dimension to my digital work.

Left: Original vector of “Fish Pile”, 2014. Photoshop
Right: A pixel landscape, 2014. Photoshop
In the second critique, several topics that were discussed the first time came up again, including discussion of the commercial qualities of my art, and my motivation to prefer a smaller scale. It was proposed that I might want to push my artwork even farther in the direction of commercial art, perhaps by making t-shirts, figures, stickers, or huge, eye-catching posters. However, I had already come to terms with what I view as the limited commercial aspect of my artwork and my recognition that I do not have an interest in producing commercial art per se.

Semester two

By my second semester, I had recognized and accepted that I wanted to remain true to my interests when making art, even if I still felt a little hesitant about it in the context of formal training as an artist. The original event that helped me to feel comfortable with this choice was my preparation for the SGCI 2014 exchange portfolio, where I was more comfortable staying closer to my interests. As I pondered preparations for SGCI 2015 during the start of the second semester this helped me again with those feelings of confidence, as well as gave me a deadline to have something to work towards—I knew I would want to show some of my thesis work at the open portfolio session.

I spent a long time considering the route I would take for some of the prints I wanted to show, but I knew I wanted at least one print to feature a hummingbird. When I was at SGCI in San Francisco last year, a hummingbird would perch on a plant outside my hotel window every morning, and every morning I would gaze at it for about half an hour, while taking nonstop
photographs (even though the bird hardly moved, so 90 percent of the photographs look exactly the same). My hotel roommates quickly caught on to this behavior and would abandon me to get breakfast, because they knew I would stare at the bird all morning. I was fascinated by this bird’s adventurous spirit and bravery—why was he in this big city every morning at the exact same time, sitting on this branch outside my window? I decided then and there that my prints next year would feature this tiny adventurer.

I experimented with Illustrator at the beginning of the semester, originally considering using the vinyl cutter or laser cutter to add to or subtract from the surface of the paper. I developed many vectored hummingbird designs, but my studies gradually and naturally evolved into a Photoshop illustration with many similar qualities to my print from last year’s exchange. The final physical prints all received light, atmospheric layers of pronto plate lithography and monoprinting over their surfaces. I had originally intended for the ink to be less transparent, but the effect of the sheer applications of ink created an interesting phenomenon where the digital prints had the smell and texture associated with traditional printmaking. This accidental result, however, created an interesting sense of blurriness between digital and traditional techniques in my work – in the final product, it is not obvious which parts were made on the computer, and which were made by hand.
Left top: Hummingbird sphere on branch, 2015. Illustrator
Left bottom: Apodiform progress, 2015. Photoshop
Right: Apodiform, 2015. Photoshop & print
While at SGCI, I was able to present some of my thesis work as planned. Though passersby commented on most of the art and prints that I presented, they were always most drawn to my hummingbird exchange print, “Apodiform”, as well as the proof from last year’s “Happy Fish.” Most people were curious about the process used to create these prints, because they could see the marks of traditional printmaking but also the apparent digital aspects. This helped start many pleasant conversations with people about my methods. Something else that prompted conversation was simply the fact that many people could relate to the hummingbird with stories about the hummingbirds in their yards and gardens. Others were excited about birds due to the popularity of current bird memes online. People were also excited to share their personal experiences with me. Ultimately, it was conversations like these at SGCI that made me realize that my prints of endearing animals were bridging many kinds of fan cultures—anime fans, printmakers, nature lovers— and reaching people beyond my usual internet sphere of interactions.

My own interest in animals as one of my preferred subjects stems from similar influences that were behind my interest in fan art. I have had a fascination with small animals and bugs from an early age, often catching them and bringing them into my house (my parents were probably thrilled that through some of my first video games like Pokemon this habit of creature collecting became safe, virtual and portable). As I have grown up, I have turned to recording my encounters with these birds, frogs and bugs through photography, rather than collecting them and bringing them inside.

Consistent with my prior practice, adhering to realistic depictions of animals is an essential aspect of my own artistic style. For example, I will not be adding extra eyeballs or
stretching proportions until the form of the animal is unrecognizable — a certain connection to a traditional image is necessary for my appreciation of these creatures. I had played with this idea for a while in my sketchbook, paying attention to the ways that Takashi Murakami would stretch and squeeze his characters into different forms. While I might consider taking some liberties with the form, I realized that what I am often considering are changes that would emphasize the endearing qualities of the animal. In that way I am trying to instill the same sense of attraction and empathy in the viewer that I feel myself when contemplating these creatures.

One artist whose work and approach to animals as subject matter that resonated with me is Hunt Slonem. His whimsical murals of butterflies and birds were an inspiration to me from the moment I first spotted one of his vibrant, hand-painted monoprints, “Bird Wing-B” at the IFPDA Print Fair in NYC. Slonem is a collector of animals himself — he keeps birds, monkeys and other pets in his New York studio. He spends the first two hours of his day caring for them, before spending the rest of the day painting them. He believes that animals exist with their own “rare innocence” and can bring it out in others — his artwork “bestows love and devotion on their marvelous existence” (Kuspit, 23). I feel that when I am portraying an animal, I am doing it for a similar reason, and my hope is that the viewer can feel a similar sense of attachment to the animal depicted.

Hunt Slonem, Bird Wing-B, 2013. Monoprint
Over the course of developing my thesis studies, I learned to have more confidence in considering my own interests and influences and letting that guide my work. Over the past few semesters, I have been presented with a range of possibilities and directions to take with my work, and have been able to experiment with some of these, learning from setbacks as well as achieving small successes. In addition, I have acquired new techniques during this exploration that I look forward to using in artistic endeavors in the future. However, I think one of my most important experiences over these semesters of thesis research concerns personal and artistic growth, through experimentation with combinations of my styles and interests. Enthusiasm and passion for art that I create is of primary importance to me, and I feel this excitement most strongly when I am engaging with images and ideas influenced by fan cultures — which I discovered could be found in places other than the internet, such as at SGCI or at Wellesley. Although my final products were quite different from my original visions for the end of my second semester, the process that brought me here led me to realize that what is most meaningful to me about art-making is generally not the subject, nor the process, but rather the profound sense of satisfaction in bridging communities and fan cultures with art.
Works Cited

Works Consulted


