
Miguel Chevalier: Digital Art or the Possibility of Other Worlds

Interview by Philippe Piguet - 2013

Nestled in Ivry-sur-Seine, La Fabrika is the studio occupied by Miguel Chevalier. This space may be seen as a futuristic laboratory entirely dedicated to the Digital Arts. The artist who works there, backed by a small team devoted to his cause, invites the visitor to discover all the things that can be created on the basis of software specially designed for that purpose: a large Letterist herbarium, interactive virtual gardens, light installations, sculptures printed in 3D, photographic prints, etc. Something of the possibility of other worlds is here at work, turning one's gaze and, at the same time, questioning it. Everything seems to have gone so quickly since Chevalier, nearly thirty years ago, began to explore this field it seems fitting to survey again along with him. A true encounter awaits.

PHILIPPE PIGUET: Taking into account the extremely rapid evolution of technologies, what are the qualitative changes that have occurred in your work?

MIGUEL CHEVALIER: Back in the early '80s, it was very difficult to have access to powerful computers in order to create artistic works, for they were very expensive; computers for the general public were still in their infancy. . . . I could do nothing but make still or 2D animated works on photographic media or record them on magnetic tapes. The appearance of microcomputing in the late '80s gradually allowed me to obtain my own equipment, but the difficulty with exhibiting one's work remained, since the art world still had a number of prejudices against this type of creative work. I was seen more as a technician than as an artist. . . . In the late '90s/early 2000s, a new era opened, with the democratization of cell phones and the appearance of the first graphic cards capable of calculating thousands of polygons for video games. That then allowed me to create my first totally digital works, that is to say, ones capable of being generated *ad infinitum*, like "Super-Natures," which are virtual gardens that transform and alter themselves in real time.

P.P. In looking at how your approach developed over time, it would seem that some new issues were put into play in it that not only invited the viewer to become involved in the work but also called for other forms of expression. Everything that happens around "Super-Natures," "Liquid Pixels," and "Digital Arabesques" thus was aimed at preparing the terms for a new interactive and transdisciplinary aesthetic. Is the cause of this simply the technological development we spoke of?

M.C: As early as my first artistic investigations, nature and artifice have constituted my favorite, though not unique, themes. Very early on, I worked on the theme of botanical greenhouses, which are artificial spaces—a light-based architecture that delimits the space of a forward-looking microcosm. What interests me today is that scientists have succeeded in creating processes that simulate plant growth. That has led me to imagine that I could recreate a form of artificial nature that is modeled on a stereotype of reality, though a

reinvented one, as Claude Monet did with his large water-lily paintings.

P.P. So, are you against the idea expressed by Christine Buci-Glucksmann in this same journal [see (*art absolutement*), 3 (Winter 2003)], when she said that we have gone from a crystal-image to a flux-image, thus breaking with the traditional concept of mimesis?

M.C. We are indeed in a flux-image, in the sense that it is self-generating, that it generates a process of birth, development, and change through time, as is the case with "Fractal Flowers." So long as one doesn't unplug the computer, the software generates a continuous flow [*un flux continu*]. It is not a looped repetition, as in video, but rather a flow that is always in a state of becoming and that never comes back to its point of origin. I am not seeking to try and justify my tools but instead to show that they allow one to develop an art in its own right that it is impossible to create with other known creative methods, even though that is to be found embryonically in the work of a number of artists.

P.P. That's an important point, because you still seem to want to link your work to art history. It's as if you wanted to fit it into that history and show its connections with earlier works.

M.C. All artists who have sought to make a clean sweep of what existed before them have ultimately had history catch up with them. That's indigenous to the phenomenon of avant-garde movements. Curiously, people no longer talk today about the avant-garde, as if we've been over with novelty since the '70s. Yet Digital Art opens up some almost unexplored fields. Also, for my part, what I do is try, somehow or other and with the means at my disposal, to show how these virtual worlds can today regenerate ideas while at the same time having some connections with art history and the artistic movements of the late nineteenth century. For example, with Georges Seurat's Pointillism, with Monet's Impressionism, or, closer to us, Constructivism and Piet Mondrian, or Kinetic Art with Victor Vasarely and Jesús Rafael Soto. . . .

P.P. To what do you attribute the fact that there are no longer any artists who explore these new leads?

M.C. That's tied up with several factors. First of all, there's lack of knowledge about most of these tools, therefore a lack of understanding on the part of artists and gallery owners. Next, there's the fact that art schools became aware only belatedly of the importance of Digital Art and they have left the teaching of it to professors who don't practice this discipline. One has therefore retained only a sketchy view of Digital Art that is well beneath what might be expected of it; that is to say, by limiting oneself most often to retouching some photographs or drawings with the help of Photoshop software. . . . What isn't shown is how one can create generative worlds in 2D and 3D. Finally, the creation of the kinds of software I make is complex, for it requires an idea of artistic creativity, but also the coordination of a team of computer programmers and electronics engineers. In general, the works or installations I present require two to three years of work, and numerous tests are necessary before they can be shown to the public.

P.P. Does the opening of a place like La Gaîté Lyrique in Paris, which is devoted exclusively to Digital Art, compensate for all these things that are holding it back?

M.C. It serves, in my opinion, above all to ghettoize the situation. There isn't enough transversality between this place and other exhibition spaces dedicated to painting, photography, and video. For me, the Digital Arts fully belong on the contemporary arts scene. A place like Paris's Palais de Tokyo is much more appropriate, since it doesn't lock us into a

being a speciality.

P.P. On the contrary, doesn't the way the Digital Arts have of appearing in such diverse spaces as on computer screens, in the street, and within cell phones risk leading to their dispersion?

M.C. For me, on the contrary, that's what gives these arts their strength. I can create a work on an urban scale as well as within a cell phone that can be downloaded or that might, on account of this, touch an entire population of individuals that do not necessarily go to museums or galleries. That's a fantastic potential, incommensurable with the tools of the past. Andy Warhol initiated art in the age of its mechanical reproduction with silkscreen printing; we are at the next stage, that of the image in the age of its electronic reproduction.

Digital Art can be both virtual and real, for with the new 3D printers, it's possible to give material form to the virtual; a real revolution is underway in the world of sculpture. . .

P.P. 3D printers? What are they?

M.C. Today, I'm creating some generative software programs, like "Fractal Flowers," that generate virtual plants in 3D. I can, at any moment, halt their growth process and extract therefrom a computer file that can then be printed, layer by layer, in stereolithography. This virtual universe in resin form then becomes tangible, with a true physicality to it.

P.P. You are speaking of digital technology's potential to open upon a poetics. What is the specific nature of the poetics of digital technology?

M.C. Light. Digital technology allows one to open up worlds of light in 2D and 3D. It immerses the viewer within the image. Unlike the kinds of research being conducted by James Turrell, digital technology's capacity for immersion makes as much use of figurative representation as of abstraction. Moreover, digital technology allows the viewer to interact with the work by moving around, which makes of him fully an agent of the work and leads him to amplify its various potentialities.

P.P. So, what's the next stage in your work?

M.C. One of my most dearest wishes is to continue to create multisensory installations like the one I was able to experiment with at the Museum of Nature and Hunting in Paris by inviting other creative artists like the composer Jacopo Baboni Schilingi to create generative musical works and by creating, along with Annick Menardo, an olfactory universe related to my own creative works so as to stimulate, at the same time, all our senses. The idea is to create immersive sensorial virtual universes in large natural spaces like old quarries that bring us back to a very distant age, the age of cave art.

P.P. Like Plato's cave?

M.C. Yes, a cavern of images!!! That's the ambitious objective I have for July 19 and 20, 2012 in the Baux-de-Provence Quarry, as part of the "a-part" Festival. I am going to present an interactive virtual-reality installation over 7,000 m², which will be one-of-a-kind experience. You're invited.