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DIGITAL REVOLUTION NICK FUDGE IN CONVER- SATION WITH RÖMER + RÖMER

The pictures have a certain haptic feeling and do not look like a flat screen. We vary the order of the colour and the texture. Sometimes brushstrokes are deliberately visible, sometimes the paint is a bit fluid, sometimes shiny, sometimes dull, sometimes a pattern is created with a roller.

Over the course of several months Nick Fudge and Römer + Römer (Nina and Torsten Römer), conducted an e-mail conversation based around the notion of the digital revolution and its implication for their works. They used Google Translate for the questions and then everything was processed back again and edited for readability.

Nick Fudge: Digital revolutions have precipitated, I think, a crisis of the authenticity of the 'image', and I think painting is ideally situated to embody this problematic. For me personally, this newly-modern moment came in New York in 1994 when I encountered an Apple computer for the first time: it was like a eureka moment as I realised that the new graphic software I was experimenting with (*Fractal Design Painter*, *MacDraw* and *MacPaint*, *Adobe Photoshop*, etc.), presented me with an array of 'new' painting tools and media. With your large-scale paintings, with their hyperrealised digitised appearance

or interfaces, I can't help but be very curious about the moment you realised that the digital revolution was something that you as painters should respond to, and also, how long ago this insight occurred. You are painters that make paintings of figures and of actual human events (such as concerts, festivals etc.), and so you re-present the idea of the 'real' (in digitised form) on canvas.

Römer + Römer: We moved to Berlin in the year 2000. The city had a lot of free space: communication was the focus here as part of a growing art metropolis. It seemed appropriate to us at that time to deal with performance and installation art. We returned to painting when, in 2003, analogue photography was becoming more and more replaced by digital photography. Also, the change in the city itself became crucial with the decomposition of creative spaces and a rapid gentrification. We felt as if we wanted to stop time and we wanted to capture the fleetingness of the moment of change and, through this, transform it into history through painting. We focused on the changing district of Kreuzberg, where we've lived since we moved to Berlin. The political local debates, the hedonistic parties and cultural scene interested us. We were never concerned with overall masses, but with specific groups, scenes, with communication, and finally with freedom of expression. We did not want to be Berlin painters, since ultimately we were talking about exchanging ideas and utopias. The small microcosms that we took up with dealt with global issues. So now we are interested in temporary communities that naturally manifest differently elsewhere. So we went with taking chances traveling we went to Russia, to Ukraine, to Morocco, and Israel. Due to our participation in exhibitions in Asia we have had long stays in Korea, in China, and then in Japan. These were all interesting experiences and pictorial inventions were created out of them.

Opposite:
Rabid Transit (detail)
2017
Oil and acrylic on canvas
230 x 300 cm

Courtesy of the artists

Disguise, manga, and cosplay were the fanciful haunts of the high-tech society of the young generation but these horizons are now already dying out and fading. Looking back with nostalgia on our youthful years, the fashionable appearance of such break-outs from regular society drew us in. Our image research later took us to Brighton for the big Pride, to the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, to the Fusion Festival in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and finally to the desert of Nevada in the USA, to Burning Man. Relevant for our research are social media and Internet, so that for us painting is a hybrid of various media of our time. It feels a record of a fragile reality.

NF: So would you say that you view painting as a trusted record of urban (or other) change? It seems to me, to be somewhat ironic, that urban photographs taken in Paris, at the turn of the twentieth century, now seem more permanent than digital 'photographs' taken with an iPhone a century later. Such is progress! Is this similar to what you mean when you say that – at a time of Europe-wide urban gentrification – digital 'photography' is somehow symptomatic of exponential change occurring in all areas of our digitally-modern life, rather than, say, a tool to faithfully record urban development? I'm wondering about digital photography as less permanent in terms of historical documentation

than analogue photography and also painting. Digital technologies are built and marketed on the notion of versions and updates (and also an implicit obsolescence) whereas painting, which was seen in the contemporary art world as an obsolete form, seems to now be a means of preservation and record. Do you then hold to the notion of a particular kind of certainty – or belief in the veracity – of painting? I'm wondering how this belief squares with the kinds of critical and ironic norms of our recent

horizons, where painting is always in question. I'm thinking in particular about Duchamp's impact/legacy on painting from the 1960s onwards – i.e. from the early sceptical paintings of Jasper Johns, to any of the postmodern painters of the 1980s and 1990s, to our present mashup of paintings developing in a post-Internet horizon.
R+R: If you think about digital photography, you can associate quickly with the snapshots of Henri Cartier-Bresson. Instead of creating lengthy

Demo im Regen
2008
Oil on canvas
115 x 150 cm

Courtesy of the artists

stagings in the studio, he captured fleeting moments in public space, as every digital camera user does today, only that today's user now has many more ways to create a picture. It has opened a new playground, the digital interface is controllable via ISO value, resolution, halftoning, alienation, various editing, etc. It creates more and more images, but they also evaporate faster and faster, see Snapchat, Instagram, or similar. By contrast, the painted picture has a very strong relevance. Given the incredibly fast mass-availability of digital images, it seems like a certain anachronism spending our lifetimes painting a pictorial representation of a digitally captured ephemeral moment which is what we do. We worked together for half a year on our biggest picture *Shower Tower Oasis* (2 x 7.5 m). In such a painting there's an enormous amount of energy accumulated, the time, work, thoughts and emotions, energy that can be read off every brushstroke and dot of colour. This energy can be transferred to the viewers, if they are open to it. In the early days of our working together we experimented with larger formats, mostly abstract pictures. But still actually medium-sized. But from about 2004, we found that the game of near and far effects in representational pictures became more extreme in our really large format paintings. Creating an immersive experience is, for us, of more importance and a better starting point than any art historical reference, either to large abstract paintings or to nineteenth-century academic art – although our paintings have been often referred to as contemporary history painting. By creating an immersive sensation, we seek a non-hierarchical view of history – a kind of 'people's history'. We do think that our work might actively change the way that people experience paintings from the past. The fact that people today are more and more used to digital images, videos, or computer games,

means that viewing habits have already changed. For many people, digital images may already be more real than analogue ones. In our work, this change is formulated pointedly. We play with 3D simulations in several paintings, which is more about giving a kind of impression of that feeling when we take off those 3D glasses at the cinema. These paintings do look a lot more spatial when looked at with the glasses on. In one exhibition we distributed a hundred 3D glasses to visitors. Actually only one of our paintings in that show was a 3D one, but funnily enough some visitors saw a strong 3D effect in the other paintings and not in that single actual 3D-effect one.

NF: I'd like to return to what you said about working together for six months on your largest painting and how you felt that a sensitive viewer could perhaps perceive the painting both as a pictorial reality and also as an object of 'significant form'. You mentioned the brushwork and colour in your painting as having the potential to communicate your hidden thoughts and emotions, etc. I do think the question of viewer sensitivity to digitised paintings (especially in terms of aesthetic emotion) is a curious one, as it seems to me that the touch of the artist's hand is often minimised or hidden altogether

Opposite:
Fischhafen in Casablanca
2009
Oil on canvas
200 x 300 cm

Generalstreik
2015
Oil on canvas
110 x 150 cm

Above:
Partylöwe
2014
Oil on canvas
180 x 300 cm

Courtesy of the artists

We vary the order of the colour and the texture. Sometimes brushstrokes are deliberately visible, sometimes the paint is a bit fluid, sometimes shiny, sometimes dull, sometimes a pattern is created with a roller. We work together as a team and constantly work out the possibilities of applying paint and colouring. Choices are made in advance as well as in the process of creation. We regard ourselves as conceptual painters.

NF: The other question of your practice that has always fascinated me (and one that relates to the idea of aesthetic emotion) is how you work together in the studio as a married couple. Could you describe your working relationship, specifically, how you actually make paintings together?

R+R: We feel that working together is a great asset. We stand next to one another in the studio, and together we think about which colours we need in order to get started and how the realization of the painting will take place. As artists, we engage in dialogue every step of the way: this creates variety and constant exchange. Although, at first, when we are standing to the right and left in front of the canvas, only one of us has worked on some parts of the picture. Then, later on, all parts of the pictures become jointly revised, so that in the final result no difference in the colour can be seen. This is how we proceed with our texts, or with the current interview, which we also write together. Sometimes one of us answers the question, sometimes the other one does. If you are satisfied with the result, you leave the finishing touch to the other one.

Black Rock Bandits Raccoon + details
2018
Oil and acrylic on canvas
230 x 300 cm

Courtesy of the artists

as the painter looks to recreate, in painterly techniques, RGB & CMYK palettes, pixelated shapes and edges, post-pointillist daubs of colour, smooth flatly painted surfaces, etc., in other words, the augmented and virtual optics of the computer screen.

Could you say something about your painting techniques and how you arrived at them? Specifically in terms of how you achieve the remarkably digitised optics of your paintings? For example, when I first visited your studio in Berlin, I was particularly impressed with how you organised your colour palette: it seemed to me to be designed to facilitate both speed of production and clarity of selection. How did this come about? Also, why did you tell me at the time that you were moving away from that system? Do you now have a different system or none at all?

R+R: As of 2004, when we switched from our predominantly abstract image series (such as *Electronic Cash* or *Infinite Justice*) to figurative painting, we gradually developed a special colour

system for our pictures. Sometimes a colour palette was created especially for a large format picture: often it was done for a complete series of pictures for which we created our own palette of colours, a palette which was then used for several pictures. We discovered that margarine cans are great for mixing and picking up colour. If you cover the oil colour with water, the colours sometimes last for a few months. So we then stack the margarine cans in the studio, something that our studio visitors always comment on.
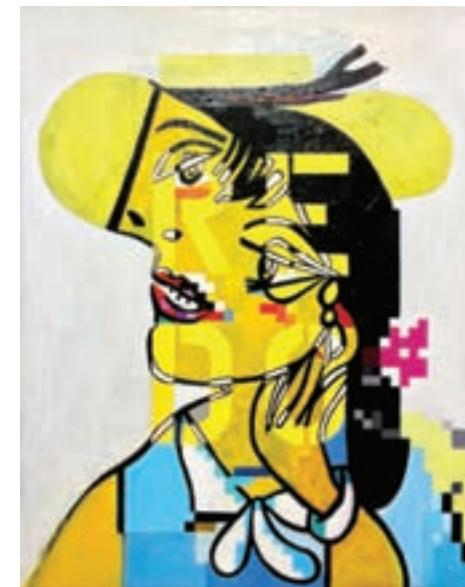
In the series *The Flood*, we started to create a wide range of blues and greens because the images showed mostly water. However, we were only able to use these colours to a limited extent for the next series of pictures. For the series about the Carnival in Rio, for example, many more colourful tones were needed. So the colour palette was transformed for each series, and was sometimes greatly enlarged, then reduced again. But we have completely gone off course in our latest series on Burning

Man. Now we individually re-mix every single colour for each painting and combine our dot and surface technology with spray paint, so transitions happen between the shades that did not exist before in our previous image series. There, each splash of colour was strictly demarcated from the next, as we had already done in our abstract paintings. We don't use fluorescent colours as they are not colourfast. To achieve the brightest possible colours, we use a lot of transparent pigments. This is why we start with translucent layers, which are applied thinly to the white canvas as background. Then come the other colours, it's important for us to create the framework of the image – so then comes the main colours of the image, which are responsible for the overall colouring. More dots come gradually until the picture is ready. All these contrasting colours, which have different surfaces, develop their own dynamics and give the image the desired materiality. So that the pictures have a certain haptic feeling and do not look like a flat screen.

Redo - Nicholas Fudge
2014-2019
Oil on canvas
44.5 x 60.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist