

Artistic Intentions

Report on Chromograph 2001 from Artweek Magazine

In the same way that Midi technology revolutionised the music industry in the late 1980's, the same digital innovations reshaped the art world in the 1990's.

In the early eighties, the likes of The Musician's Union lobbied for the banning of drum machines, now a perfectly commonplace item in the musician's armoury. In the early 1990's, the idea of a digitally reproduced art print was viewed as tantamount to heresy within the art world. In the Zero's, no self-respecting art publisher is without their increasing range of digitally reproduced, or Giclée prints.

What is so fascinating about this 'human versus machine' debate is not the idea that the hands on approach is threatened by digital reproduction, but the interaction between technology and the human element.

Technological equivalents tend to complement natural processes rather than supersede them: in contemporary music, drum machines emulating live percussion play along side live percussionists utilising both electronic and acoustic drums.

Contemporary artists combine digital art techniques and hand-treatments: a painting can be digitised, manipulated by computer, digitally printed, reworked again by the artist, re-digitised and re-printed indefinitely.

The Internet and the home PC have not replaced television as the number one form of entertainment, but TV and the Internet borrow elements from one another:

Television programs style sections of their shows on the Internet and other computer interfaces: similarly, the Internet continues to present itself as the ultimate form of interactive TV: CD ROM and web pages feature scrolling credits, virtual presenters etc.

In the Zero's, digitally generated art, once confined to the virtual world, can now be reproduced using a sympathetic medium which successfully combines the very best elements of the digital and fine art worlds.

Giclée is still a relatively new field, barely into full adulthood, but as a creative tool, this digital technology has been embraced by a whole new generation as a tool for communication, artistic creation and reproduction.

A fairly insular, but perfectly formed industry, the digitally reproduced fine art print market is proving itself to be a competitive alternative to the more traditional methods. It has taken a little over ten years, but now artists, photographers and art publishers alike are turning to digital reproduction as an innovative, efficient, quality alternative to the more time consuming, labour intensive silk screening methods.

What is also special about this business is the close interplay between the creative, the publisher, the manufacturer, and the craftsman.

Rolls influence one another in such a way that the potential for the cross fertilisation of the young business mind, the tech-savvy artist, the maverick technician and the modern-day craftsman, is unique.

Only in the digital world is there quite so much interdisciplinary mingling. In no other niche does it actually work to an advantage. These people have a genuine respect and appreciation for one another's expertise, because they can all learn from one another: the New Media world is a small one, where reputations spread fast and leave their mark.

Any friction resulting between this interplay of disciplinary fields inevitably becomes a source of energy and growth.

In no other business do we see such a balance between cutting edge technologies and artistic endeavour, high and low art, the culturally aware and the style conscious business mind.

And so, in this unique and rapidly developing business, it seems quite logical that its leading light should be equally unique.

As a true 21st Century business, Chromograph and its founder Owen Morgan represent the perfect combination of technology and craftsmanship.

In Chromograph we see the old and the new combined. Again, this combination of two opposing elements is a kind of friction, creating energy and the potential for newness.

Although just over a year old, Chromograph is the result of ten years worth of research, development and innovation.

Chromograph's founder Owen Morgan is a renowned figure in the world of digital printing. He has been involved in the industry since its very first days, and while he has continued to remain an illusive presence, his reputation has always been maintained. Now, in 2001, Morgan is set to earn the recognition that he deserves.

It has been a roller coaster year for Chromograph, who have gone seemingly overnight, from their studio space in old church and school buildings, to an endless corridor of studios and conference rooms: from a staff of three, to a staff of ten [including administration and media/research departments].

Morgan is a determined, uncompromising figure who has made a great deal of sacrifice over the last few years to ensure that Chromograph would become what it is today: efficient, refined.

Owen was one of the very first to approach the notion of a digitally produced, archival fine art print. And while he has continued to remain on the outskirts of an industry who's notion of 'international' fails to acknowledge any country other than the US, he is now in a position to truly reap the benefits of his efforts.

He has frequently seen his own ideas come to the fore at the hands of the very people who were reluctant to support them originally. There is now a huge market for hand finished digital prints: Morgan produced his first hand varnished print in 1992.

Owen has suffered at the hands of those who would make a fast buck out of his expertise. In the style of the true innovator, he seemed destined to remain a figure forever on the outskirts of acceptance. But it seems that time is on his side: Giclée has never been more in demand, and increasingly, the large scale commercial art publishers are turning to Owen and Chromograph for the bulk of their output.

And while Chromograph has the capacity to produce volume work on a scale unheard of in the industry, Owen remains committed to a continuing need to experiment. Always an innovator, willing to tread new ground while others keep their sites squarely on current events alone, Morgan produced his first hand-finished digital prints in 1992. Almost ten years on, untreated digital art prints are now the minority.

Where most Giclée printers have one single wide format printer, Chromograph have dozens. Housed in a maze of studios and work spaces, Chromograph have three separate production suites, proofing studio [where the images are scanned, photographed, and retouched when necessary], a silk screening department [for the increasingly popular glazes and varnishing], and two 'hand-embellishing' studios [which entails a crack team of fine art graduates painstakingly reproducing the original artists brush strokes, or adding all manner of exotic hand-applied after effects such as gold-leaf].

For Chromograph and the art publishers that they work with, the area of post-production is always a question of taste rather than a necessity defined by a need to compensate for a lack of quality in the print [take a closer look at the those finely glazed art prints the next time you come across a Giclée print: if you can't see the pixels then the chances are you are looking at a Chromograph].

There is a great deal of style and personality to Chromograph, again, unique qualities in an industry which normally restricts itself to one man, one printer, one industrial looking factory floor. Publishers, galleries and artists alike look to Chromograph not only for an unsurpassable service, but for their opinion on materials, artistic direction, and technique.

And while Chromograph make use of the very latest G4 Apple Macintosh computers, and wide format printers of all persuasions, there is a real sense of craftsmanship and artistic sensibility to every project that they oversee.

To give you an idea of just how fast Chromograph are expanding, they have more printers than any other digital fine art printer in Europe; they use more paper and more inks than the rest of the UK digital printers put together. In the next twelve months it is estimated that they will need at least thirty of the latest Roland 'V8' wide format printers. This would effectively make them at least fifteen times bigger than any other UK digital fine art printer.

Martin Taylor, Chromograph {Head of New Media}