

# GALERIE SIMON BLAIS

## Mark Stebbins: Pixel, Poxel, Puxel

By Matthew Ryan Smith

*The New Aesthetic is not superficial, it is not concerned with beauty or surface texture. It is deeply engaged with the politics and politicisation of networked technology, and seeks to explore, catalogue, categorise, connect and interrogate these things. Where many seem to read only incoherence and illegibility, the New Aesthetic articulates the deep coherence and multiplicity of connections and influences of the network itself.<sup>i</sup>*

—James Bridle, “The New Aesthetic and its Politics”

≈

First and foremost: Mark Stebbins is a painter. It’s seductive to slip his work into basic categories of craft, computer art, glitch aesthetics, and so on; yet it’s through the language of abstract painting that he wrestles with digital culture and the information age. Both have come to define vernacular life. We’re saturated with Adobe Photoshop, ultra-high definition 4K televisions, and smartphones—not to mention the clandestine activities of the National Security Agency, cyber warfare, and unmanned drones. An important part of this is the collapse of public and private spheres, whether we like it or not. In light of these social and political activities, Stebbins’s paintings drift into areas beyond mere aesthetics.

The pixel (and pixelation) continues to be used in ways that obscure the truth-value of images. In the new era of “fake news” and “alternative facts,” pixelation has come to represent a powerful metaphor for the distortion of truth. For example, image manipulators utilize digital pixelation software to obscure the identity of individuals, to camouflage military actions, and to conceal sexual imagery. Moreover, “apps” exist today whose only function is to pixelize digital photographs, interior designers create area rugs comprised only of colourful pixels, industrial designers coat building facades in large pixels, and game designers employ pixel aesthetics to construct virtual labyrinths. The pixel is everywhere, which begs the question: what does this collective fascination with pixelation mean?<sup>ii</sup>

The omnipresence of ultra-high resolution visual technologies indicates an obsession with “high-def” since the early 2000s; as a result, artists and designers engaging with pixel art and pixel aesthetics are often cited as being “oppositional,” even “deviant” to such technologies.<sup>iii</sup> But it’s not so much what’s in the content of Stebbins’s paintings that is oppositional but his technical approach to painting. Thousands—sometimes tens of thousands—of hand-painted pixels underscore a painfully meticulous approach to abstract painting that foregrounds the value of process. It is precisely for this reason that Stebbins likens his work in grids and squares to the methodical practices of knitting and stitching; each forming intricate layers of material that loop in a continuous system to create a network of visual information. How strange that “traditional” crafts such as knitting and stitching relate so closely to the ways that information technology operates today? To Stebbins, each pixel represents a thread which exists on its own, in its own autonomous space, but is vitally linked to other pixels to forge a kind of quilt, albeit a painted one. This compositional (and conceptual) structure not only blurs the lines between craft and glitch art, but also the lines between craft and progressive painting.

Painted pixels emphasize the materiality of painting and the hand-of-the-artist. They may appear as digital paintings produced by computer software from afar, but acrylic hand-paintings such as *Jaggy Flag* (2016), *Clouds Adrift* (2016) and *Crossovers* (2016) embrace pixelation while abstracting it into geometric, fragmented, and curvilinear shapes, the edges of which Stebbins describes as “jaggies.” The

# GALERIE SIMON BLAIS

consequence is a series of geometric abstraction paintings masquerading as digital painting; however, his fracturing of the picture plane, implying the existence of variable dimensions, and constructing form through colour may speak as much to the influence of Cézanne as it does to the popularity of digital painting using computer software. Over 100 years after his death, Cézanne's stress on the composite structure of painting finds new relevance in the Information Age through Stebbins's pixels. Many of Cézanne's paintings and portraits disclose a pointed attraction to squaring objects on an imaginary grid.<sup>iv</sup> As such, he set a crucial precedent into thinking about how visual perception can be mathematized into geometric structures and shapes. It is no surprise, then, that Stebbins looks to Cézanne to understand how a flat painting can produce the sensation of three-dimensionality. Plus, there's that interest in painting modern life, too.

For artist and writer James Bridle, "The New Aesthetic" characterizes the way that digital networks progressively leak into the real, physical world.<sup>v</sup> With this in mind, it would seem that Stebbins's paintings attempt to do exactly that: foreground the influence of digital imagery on contemporary visuality, on our very ways of seeing and thus the ways that we communicate with each other. Clearly, the pixel is defining how we experience reality and how we mediate our personal relationships through technology. It says a lot about who we are and what we've become.

*February, 2017*

---

<sup>i</sup> James Bridle, "The New Aesthetic and its Politics," *booktwo.org* (12 June, 2013), <http://booktwo.org/notebook/new-aesthetic-politics/> (accessed 6 February, 2017).

<sup>ii</sup> For more on the collective fascination with pixels in art and visual culture, see: Matthew Ryan Smith, "Hip to be Square: The Pixel Revolution in Art and Visual Culture," *Blackflash Magazine* 33.1 (Winter 2016): 36-42.

<sup>iii</sup> The full quote reads: "Our team has been debating this for a long time, because we all unanimously love the aesthetic. The debate arose from the occasional anxiety we would get from the "HD this, HD that" fetishism that began in the early 2000s. In a way, our culture's obsession with higher and higher resolutions made us defiant. It reinforced our stance on pixel art purism." See: Blake Reynolds, "A Pixel Artist Renounces Pixel Art," *Dinofarm Games* (5 December, 2015), <http://www.dinofarmgames.com/a-pixel-artist-renounces-pixel-art/> (accessed 6 February, 2017).

<sup>iv</sup> See, for example, Blake Gopnik, "Sublimely at Odds," *Washington Post* (29 January, 2006), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/27/AR2006012700400.html>

<sup>v</sup> See: Alex Carp, "The Drone Shadow Catcher," *The New Yorker* (5 December, 2013), <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-drone-shadow-catcher>