

Michael O'Rourke

***A Series of Digital Interactive
Multimedia Murals***

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A Series of Digital Interactive Multimedia Murals



Picnic. 2003 - 2004, 7' x 45'

Introduction

Since 1999, I have been working on a series of multimedia murals. The murals are 7' to 8' tall and range in length from 16' to 45'. Each combines printed imagery, live interactive video, pre-recorded video, and pre-recorded audio. The murals are fabricated of lightweight materials in modular fashion, making it possible to disassemble them and transport them to temporary indoor installations. Both the composition and fabrication of the murals are digital.

Art as Analogue

Art resonates with us not merely because of the subjects it represents, but also – and frequently primarily – because of *how* it represents things. More specifically, in much of the most powerful art, the compositional structure of the artwork somehow serves as an analogue to our emotional experiences as humans. Just as a tuning fork when struck sends out waves that can cause another, similarly tuned device, to resonate, so the structural relationships set up in an artwork can resonate with the emotional and psychic relationships we have within ourselves.

This is why music, even though it is very rarely “representational” and does not imitate real-world sounds, can move us so. It is the relationships between the notes – the variations in pitch, timbre, tempo, harmonies – that cause us to have an emotional reaction. The structure of the musical elements, the structure of the composition is what moves us. The opening bars of the second movement of Beethoven’s 7th symphony are extremely simple – a few variations in pitch, a simple repetitive rhythm, a simple harmony.



Beethoven, 7th Symphony, opening of Second Movement

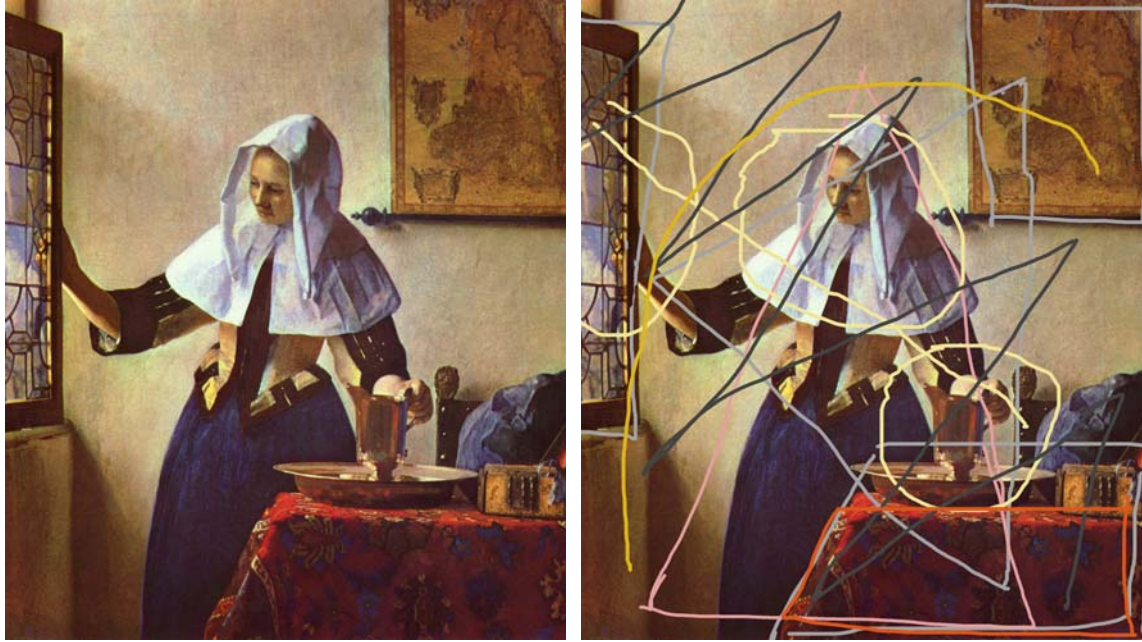
But they are terrifically powerful because somehow they resonate with something inside us, some internal emotional structure we have developed based on our life experiences.

This is also why abstract painting and sculpture can succeed. Willem de Kooning's painting, *A Tree in Naples*, is powerful not because it represents a moving event or thing. In fact, we cannot say that it "represents" anything (in spite of the title). The painting is powerful because of the relationships between the forms and colors. These relationships are somehow analogous to experiences we have had, and that is why we respond viscerally to the painting.



Willem de Kooning, *A Tree in Naples*

If we add to these “analogous” effects deriving from compositional structure the additional power of representation, visual art can generate additional layers of emotional effect for us. Vermeer’s *Woman with a Pitcher* has been deeply moving to many people over generations because it is doing two very moving things at once: It is representing a scene which has strong emotional associations of peacefulness for many of us. And it has simultaneously structured its composition of colors, forms, lights, darks, and lines in such a way as to create an analogue of great calm.



Johannes Vermeer, *Woman with a Pitcher*. Some of the compositional relationships.

The murals I have developed in recent years attempt to achieve this same powerful combination of a) representation imagery rich in possible associative significance, and b) compositional structures that serve as rich analogues to human experience.

The Mural Format

In developing these pieces, I was drawn to the mural form because of the breadth of what I was interested in dealing with in the compositions. My interest was not in trying to capture an individual human emotion or experience – for example, love, hatred, fear, boredom, peace – but rather the richness and diversity of human experience, the combination of all of these feelings and emotions simultaneously.

At this stage of my life I am more interested in the accumulation of experiences and emotions – some complementary, many apparently contradictory – that reside within us. We frequently are not aware of this tumult of experiences and feelings, and we may not see the patterns between them if we do become aware



Mural for Taiwan: 2000. Intended size, 9' x 36'

of them, but they are there in all their confusing and incomprehensible glory. Many of our emotions and experiences may strike us as antithetical to each other – passion and boredom, for example – but we all experience them within the same human life.

In order to capture this range of experience and feeling, I gravitated toward the mural format, a format large enough to encompass a large number and a wide range of images. Within this format, I also chose, for the same reason, to create a dense composition of a number of images.

The large scale of the mural format also allowed me to take advantage of certain perceptual phenomena that created another important analogue to what I was trying to capture emotionally. With a smaller composition, the entire composition fits into the viewer's field of vision in one moment of time. We stand in front of the painting or photograph, and we see the whole thing. We can, and do, look at details and move our attention around the composition, but we also can both look at the whole and look at the details from one vantage point. This is not the case with a large-scale mural. In order to see the whole, we must back up to a point where we cannot see the details. And in order to see the details, we must move closer, to a point where we cannot see the whole. And in order to see yet other details, we must move farther down the mural to a point where we cannot see those earlier details. This physical movement of the viewer creates an effective analogue for the way I feel we perceive and make sense of our world and our lives. It is hard for us to process, and frequently even remember, events and aspects of our lives that are very different or even antithetical. It is hard for us to attend simultaneously to both the details of daily living and the overall pattern of our lives. And as hard as it is to make sense of those details *vis à vis* our own individual life, it is even harder to make sense of them *vis à vis* human life in general. And harder yet *vis à vis* the totality of all life or existence.

Still Imagery

The imagery of the murals comes from a variety of sources in an effort to reflect the emotional and experiential diversity of our lives. Imagery from urban environments suggests our work lives, the busy-ness of our lives, our need for society. We see the bustle of city life, the mix of races, of old and young, the crowding, the energy.



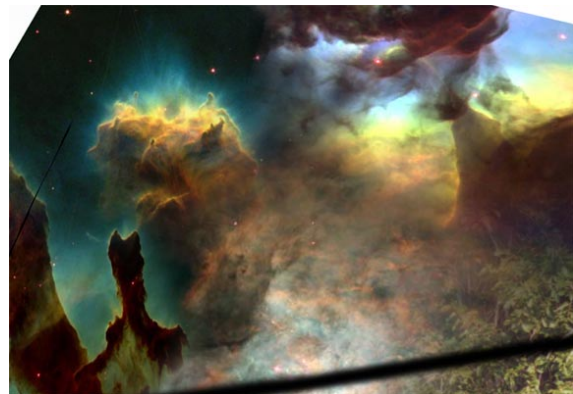
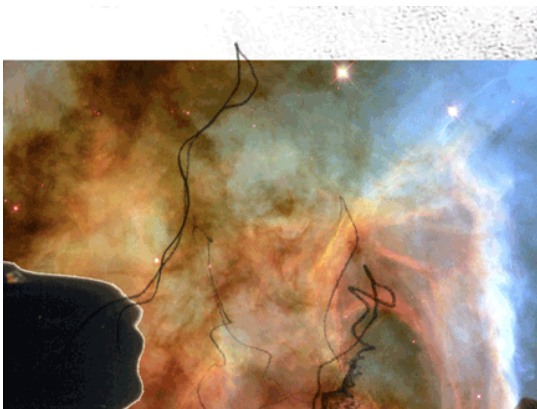
New York #2: 2001, 7' x 16'

Contrasting with this, imagery from Nature reminds us of our connection to the wider world – the beauty of little things, be they leaves or bees, the wonder of big things, whether clouds or majestic trees. The forms and colors of this imagery are presented in such a way as to link back to the urban imagery, hopefully causing us to see potential connections between the two. The colors and forms of a bee may relate to those in an image of people rushing about their business in the city rushing about their business in the city, making us aware that the bee and we are, in certain fundamental ways, the same.



Ocean. 2006 – 2007, 6' x 17'

Further expanding on the Nature imagery is imagery from outer space (taken from the Hubble Space Telescope). Here we see Nature on the grand scale, and are reminded of our place within that grand scale. Some may be reminded of our insignificance, others of our wonderfulness. And, just as we may become aware of the similarities among our personal life experiences, however diverse, some may see both our insignificance and our wonderfulness simultaneously. Once



Detail from *New York #2*; Detail from *Picnic*

again, it is the formal relationships that connect things. The similar shapes of a nebula, a cloud, the swirl of cloth on a dress may cause us to muse on how the nebula, cloud, and dress – and we – may be all somehow related.

Video

Embedded within each mural is one or more screens showing live video. This video is captured by cameras hidden within the mural walls. The cameras are hidden so viewers do not realize at first that they are being captured to video. Since they don't initially know that there are hidden video cameras, viewers are at first surprised to see themselves appear in the video. This effect is accentuated by the fact that the video screens also display pre-recorded video sometimes. Only when a viewer comes near the hidden camera, does the software mix their imagery with the pre-recorded imagery.



Video diptych from *Picnic*; Video from *Ocean*

In mixing the video imagery of the viewer with pre-recorded video, the inter-relationships first introduced through the still imagery are elaborated on. Now, in the video, the static printed imagery of the mural mixes and combines with the real-time interactive video of the viewers who happen to be standing in front of the mural. We the viewers become part of the imagery of the mural. Moreover, the video imagery of us is presented in such a way as to create formal relationships with the colors and forms of the still imagery. Indeed, some of the still imagery runs *through* the live video.

Audio

At various locations on the murals, audio emanates through the mural wall. On some of the murals, the audio consists of a mix of street sounds, sounds of



Viewer listening to audio of *New York #2*

nature, or music. In one mural, the audio consists of a mix of people's voices reading poetry, the poems read in a variety of languages from around the world. In another mural, the audio is extremely faint unintelligible whispering. In all cases, the audio enhances the awareness of the diversity and richness of human experience.

The audio is produced through speakers placed behind the mural wall. The volume is set to make the audio audible only if we approach fairly close to the mural. This has the effect of drawing the viewer in close. It also has the effect, on the larger murals that contain several audio tracks, of altering the mix of audio for the viewer depending on where he/she stands. If you stand closer to one end, you hear primarily that audio. As you move closer to the other end, the balance shifts and you hear more of the other audio.

Fabrication

The murals I have fabricated so far are intended for temporary indoor installations and are constructed to facilitate transport and assembly and disassembly. The extremely high-resolution image file of the entire composition is broken up into tiled sub-images. In some murals these are 8" square, in others 16" square. Each sub-image, or tile image, is printed onto paper, laminated, and then glued onto a square foam-board tile. These tiles are then glued onto foam-board panels, each of which is approximately 4' x 4'. When complete, each panel weighs less than ten pounds. The panels are constructed so that when they fit together, the seam between each panel is the same small distance as the seam between each tile.



Tiled and paneled fabrication (*New York #2*)

For each video screen, a hole is cut to the correct size in the mural wall. A video monitor is placed behind this hole, flush to the back of the mural wall. The placement of the monitor is adjusted such that the printed imagery of the mural and the moving imagery of the video run continuously through each other.

Each hidden video camera looks out through a small circular hole in the mural wall. In fabricating the tile that contains this hole, the opening of the hole is covered with a thin transparent sheet of plastic, both to protect the camera lens and to create a surface gloss consistent with the laminated surface of the tile.

I have also done tests of fabrication techniques suitable for permanent installations. One such technique is ceramic tiles, which are suitable for permanent indoor installations. Another technique, suitable for either outdoor or indoor installations, is enameled steel.

Installation



Installation in progress (*Picnic*)

Since each panel is at most 4' x 4' in dimension and weighs less than 10 pounds, transport is easy. On arrival at the site, a framework is constructed of standard household studs – the same studs that would be used for building a sheetrock wall in a home. The mural panels are screwed to this framework.

The framework is constructed about two feet from the wall to allow space behind the mural wall for equipment – computers, video, audio – and for maintenance.

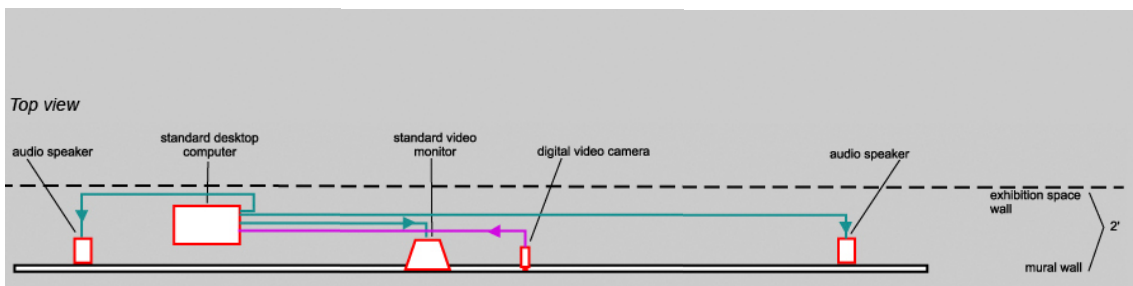


Diagram of AV equipment (*Ocean*)

At the conclusion of the exhibition, all the elements are disassembled and can easily be transported back.

Additional Supporting Materials

Additional materials, including examples of the visuals, video and audio of each mural, can be found by going to www.michaelorourke.com and following the link to **murals**.

