



Preface: River Gods

Make friends of all the brooks in your neighbourhood, and study them ripple by ripple.

Not so long ago only a handful of painters knew anything at all about computers. Now, like everyone else, there are few painters without a computer, a web site, and a cell phone. They know about Photoshop even if they do not use it. They know you can 'paint' through the computer. They know there is 'virtual' paint and 'real' paint. What they are less sure about is what all this means for the art of painting itself. What happens when painting

goes digital? Something must be gained, but what is lost? Does painting switch over into another art form? Or does it falter on the edge, and somehow remain intact? Or – this is just a hunch - has it always been digital anyway?

It is enough to keep a painter like me in a state of panic, and in need of therapy, or at least something like a comfort blanket. It has all become so strange. That, I suppose, is a good excuse for writing an essay. I first got hooked on digital paint almost twenty years ago. The program was Dazzle Paint, and I was dazzled, not just by the color I painted on the screen, but by the ideas set loose in my mind. Was I 'converted'? Did I become a digital painter? Yes and no. I blinked, but could not make up my mind. I still paint with both real and digital paint. Gradually, it occurred to me that this is quite an interesting place to be, half in the digital art world, half in the painting world. On one side I hear brave talk of the new media, of net art, interactive art, of highly energetic art forms poised to take over from 'traditional' painting; on the other side I hear – and see – painters thriving, absorbing what they need from the digital, toying with video, with photography, but in no mood to slink away. The paradox is that new technology has come up with the painting tools that renaissance artists dreamed of, yet old-style paints are still preferred by most leading artists. Amazing art is being made with no more than a pencil, a brush and some pigment. But here I go, rushing into the question of what is or isn't significant, advanced, retrograde, brilliant or dismal in art. That would be art criticism, hinting how painting, or digital painting, could flex its muscles in this new landscape. Actually, it is a great time to be a painter, and to be thinking about painting.

If I was to write an essay that was more a meditation than anything else I needed an image to come back to as a symbol. Why the river? Some ten years ago I was at a private view of the sculptor Eduardo Chillida, and found myself talking with a fellow enthusiast for all things digital. He invited me to visit the small company he worked for, called the Zap Factor. For some reason he didn't show up at the office, but I did not mind waiting there. The office happened to be in an old warehouse on the Thames. In fact I knew this space and its fabulous views already, because since the seventies these warehouses, then semi-derelict, had been co-opted as artists' studios through an

organisation called Space, started in 1968 by Bridget Riley and Peter Sedgely. (For the record, I have been in the same Space studio since 1971, and must be about their longest lasting tenant). I forget exactly what Zap Factor did, except it was pre-web, over optimistic, and was started by someone who was inspired by swimming with dolphins. I must have been staring at the grimy greys of the Thames gently ebbing for an hour while the office buzzed behind me, and I kept thinking about the absurdity of us humans scurrying around excited by our toys while the Thames just flowed on as it had done for centuries, unconcerned.

I kept thinking of Turner, and went back to my own studio and within a week had made a moody quite spare painting out of those same greys. Looking back, it epitomised the dilemma of any painter aware of the new 'paints' emerging in software, the dilemma of being part of this new cult at the same time as staying loyal to the old gods of painting. It was only much later that I realised that it also made sense to think of the 'stream' of images, messages that comes to us through TV, mobile phones, the internet, screens here there and everywhere as – metaphorically – a river. In other words, that this 'digital river' could itself be the subject, the phenomenon that a painter attempted to understand – I won't say represent. Turner was not only fascinated by water, waves, storms, but by speed, and was one of the few painters to depict a steam train in the first half of the nineteenth century. I wondered whether the painting would itself be made, so to speak, from this digital material, be itself part of the river.

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My motivation throughout has been to throw some light on a subject that has been unfairly left out of the reckoning – why has so little been said about computers and painting? I hope it is a tolerable read for computer people, who will forgive my amateurish grasp of computer science; and I hope aesthetes will tolerate my lapses into techno-babble, and name-dropping conference anecdotes. It is also a book about uncertainty, little comfort for students, fellow artists and for friends of art who are expecting some weighty conclusions. I am trying to work out what I think, but in the process – on my river journey - the encounters make it less easy for me to settle down in one or other 'position'. I remain an agnostic. Perhaps that is the point of the

metaphor: the river changes, and if it is the Thames it is tidal. It flows first this way, then that way. Whatever. If one or two artists stop complaining about the lack of essays on 'digital painting' with any awareness at all of 'the art scene' – of what makes painters tick, groupies crowd out art fairs, and critics scream in pleasure or pain - then I shall consider my mission half accomplished.

ⁱ John Ruskin *The Elements of Drawing; in Three Letters to Beginners*, Smith, Elder & Co, London 1857. Preface p. 154.