Little Squares:

The Pixel as Material and Metaphor

Dave Kemp, Thelma Rosner, Mark Stebbins, Shaheer Zazai

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Beyond Little Squares: The Pixel as Personal

Pixels are small squares of colour that form the building blocks of digital images. When combined in a pattern with other pixels they produce a complete picture. Pixels are at the core of discussions concerning the language of digital communication. Take, for example, James Bridle's blog post "The New Aesthetic" that describes how digital technology produces its own visual language, or Stephanie Buck's essay "The Pixel Renaissance" which explains how the shareability of pixels lends itself to web culture. What is lost in this discussion, however, are the reasons why contemporary artists use pixels in relation to memory, time, and place. In this exhibition, their experiments are profoundly intimate—they feature images of their children, of their cultural traditions, of their surroundings, and of themselves. The result is a collection of images and materials that use the language of pixels to articulate stories about the world and the artist's place in it.

Dave Kemp invented The One Pixel Camera to record a single pixel of light; in other words, his camera translates visual information into a coloured square. In doing so it questions the capacity of the photographic camera to document truthful representations of the physical world. For instance, in works such as Self-portrait (selfie) in bathroom mirror (2014) or Wedding Portrait of Annie Merritt and Ryan Ter Averst (2015), the camera transforms cultural phenomena, such as selfies and wedding photography, into muted blocks of colour. These works both allude to the recorded event while disavowing it, for they clearly lack any representational association to a "selfie" or marriage ceremony yet nevertheless capture existing light from the real event. Thus Kemp creates a tension in viewers by prompting them to consider whether or not his pixel photographs are faithful, accurate images.

Mark Stebbins's meticulous acrylic paintings incorporate a breadth of influences including handicraft, abstract painting, and glitch art. Since 2017, his accumulation of everyday photographs have been used as source material for pixel paintings. For example, in Grandmothers (2017) Stebbins renders a family photograph of his two grandmothers seated together on a couch by painting minute pixels of 1/12 of an inch each. Completed after their passing, the painting gave

Dave Kemp, *The One Pixel Camera,* 2014, Wooden box, tripod mount, Zeiss lens, LCD viewfinder, custom electronics and software.

Dave Kemp, *Self-portrait (selfie) in bathroom mirror,* 2014, From the Series: The One Pixel Camera Project, one pixel image, archival pigment print, 15" x 15" (printed at 0.0667 pixels per inch).

Stebbins the opportunity to deeply engage with both art-making and family, the latter assisting him with the process of mourning. Viewed close-up, the painting dissolves into a cloud of little square colours, but when viewed from a distance, a representation of his grandmothers begins to emerge. While Stebbins's work engages with the complexities of visual perception, it also demonstrates how pixels can be used as metaphors for memory: Grandmothers functions as an object of remembrance while its obscurity points to the weathering of memory over time.

The scrupulous painting method of Stebbins and Thelma Rosner are comparative to the process of quilting. Rosner's ongoing series Cross Stitch Paintings began in 2010 and are inspired by embroidered cross-stitching and the plight of innocents caught in conflict.

In her words, the physical repetition of small, 3/8" squares acts as "a metaphor for the effort to anchor and protect ordinary life, despite violence and displacement." Though her paintings are loosely based on afghan war rugs and Palestinian textiles, their abstraction allows the viewer to project their own narratives on to the canvas. Such is the case with Cross Stitch #8 (2016), an 8' x 6' diptych featuring thousands of individual grey and black painted pixels accentuated by two lines of thick red paint. These lines evoke the Abstract Expressionist gesture of tossing paint-to-canvas but, alternatively, they may also conjure streams of tracer fire spraying into the night sky. Much like Kemp's camera, Rosner's paintings propose layered meanings that are not easily reconciled.

Shaheer Zazai's digital carpets are created in Microsoft Word using millions of manual keystrokes. They reflect his fascination with ancient tribal carpet weaving in Afghanistan, particularly the meditative experience of uninterrupted creative labour. His carpets are constructed spontaneously, without a pre-conceived idea for composition, and submits to the colour patterns and spacing inherent to the Word program. This enables Zazai to produce artwork that appear like other media: they bridge the distance between cross-stitching and painting, two forms of cultural expression that boast lengthy histories. And in engaging an ancient aesthetic art form with today's digital software, he ensures that his own cultural materials evolve and continue. The pixel, in this sense, is a method and means of reanimating cultural identity and expression.

Thelma Rosner, *Cross Stitch #6,* 2014, diptych, oil & graphite on canvas, 8' x 6'.
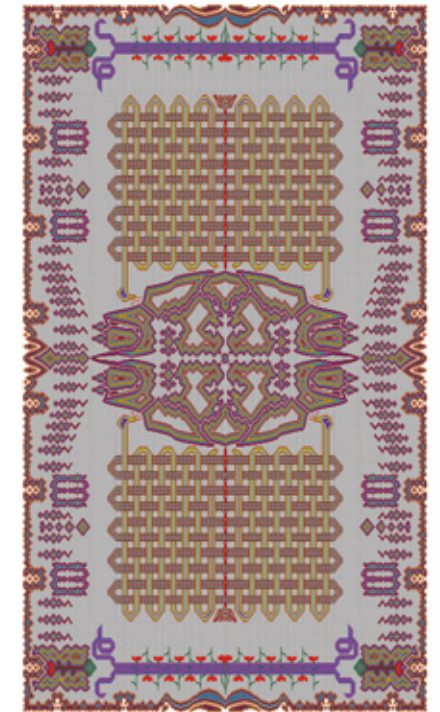
Shaheer Zazai, *KGOBLWN1,* 2019, produced on Microsoft Word, print on watercolour paper, 74" x 44"

Above: Mark Stebbins, *Passing,* 2018, acrylic paint/ink on panel, 12" x 16".

In less than a few decades, the meaning of the word "pixel" has rapidly evolved from an element that illuminates light into a metaphor for how we experience the world. The tempo of developments in virtual reality and resolution technologies, including 4k, 5k, and now 8k television screens, throw to question the way that digital imagery now appears more real than the real. In other words, visual experience is evolving into a dream-like illusion—there is nostalgia for a time when the division between digital reality and physical reality were almost indisputable.

Artist Biographies

Dave Kemp is an artist whose practice looks at the intersections and interactions between art, science, and technology. His artworks have been exhibited widely at venues such as at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Art Gallery of Mississauga, Ontario Science Centre. They are also included in the permanent collections of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre and the Canada Council Art Bank. He currently works as an Assistant Professor in the Image Arts program at Ryerson University.

Thelma Rosner has been a professional visual artist for over forty years. She was educated at Smith College and Western University, where she was mentored by Paterson Ewan. Her work has been exhibited in Canada, the United States, and England. In 2011, she was the artist-in-residence at the Banff Centre for the Arts. Her work is included in numerous public and private collections including the Canada Council Art Bank, McMaster University, McIntosh Gallery, and Museum London.

Mark Stebbins is an artist who works in painting, drawing and digital media to create images that connect craft, digital imaging and art history. His work has been exhibited across Canada and internationally. He was awarded Honourable Mention in the RBC Canadian Painting Competition in 2010 and has received grants by the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. His work resides in the collections of the Canada Council Art Bank and the Royal Bank of Canada, as well as numerous private collections worldwide.

Shaheer Zazai is an artist working in painting and digital media. His practice focuses on investigating the development of cultural identity in non-Western diasporas. He received a BFA from OCAD University in 2011 and was the OCAD University Digital Painting Atelier Artist-in-Residence in 2015. A recipient of a Canadian Ontario Arts Council grant, he has since had solo and group exhibitions at galleries including the Art Gallery of Mississauga, Trinity Square Video, John B. Aird Gallery, and Project Gallery.

NOTES:
James Bridle, "The New Aesthetic," personal website (2011), https://jamesbridle.com/works/the-new-aesthetic (accessed 10 October, 2019).
Stephanie Buck, "The Pixel Renaissance: Pixel Art's Place in 21st Century Expression," Mashable (20 January, 2012), https://mashable.com/2012/01/20/pixel-art/ (accessed 10 October, 2019).
Mark Stebbins, "Statement," text from the exhibition Among the Jaggies, Along the Seams (November 2016), http://markstebbins.ca/statement/ (accessed 5 October, 2019).
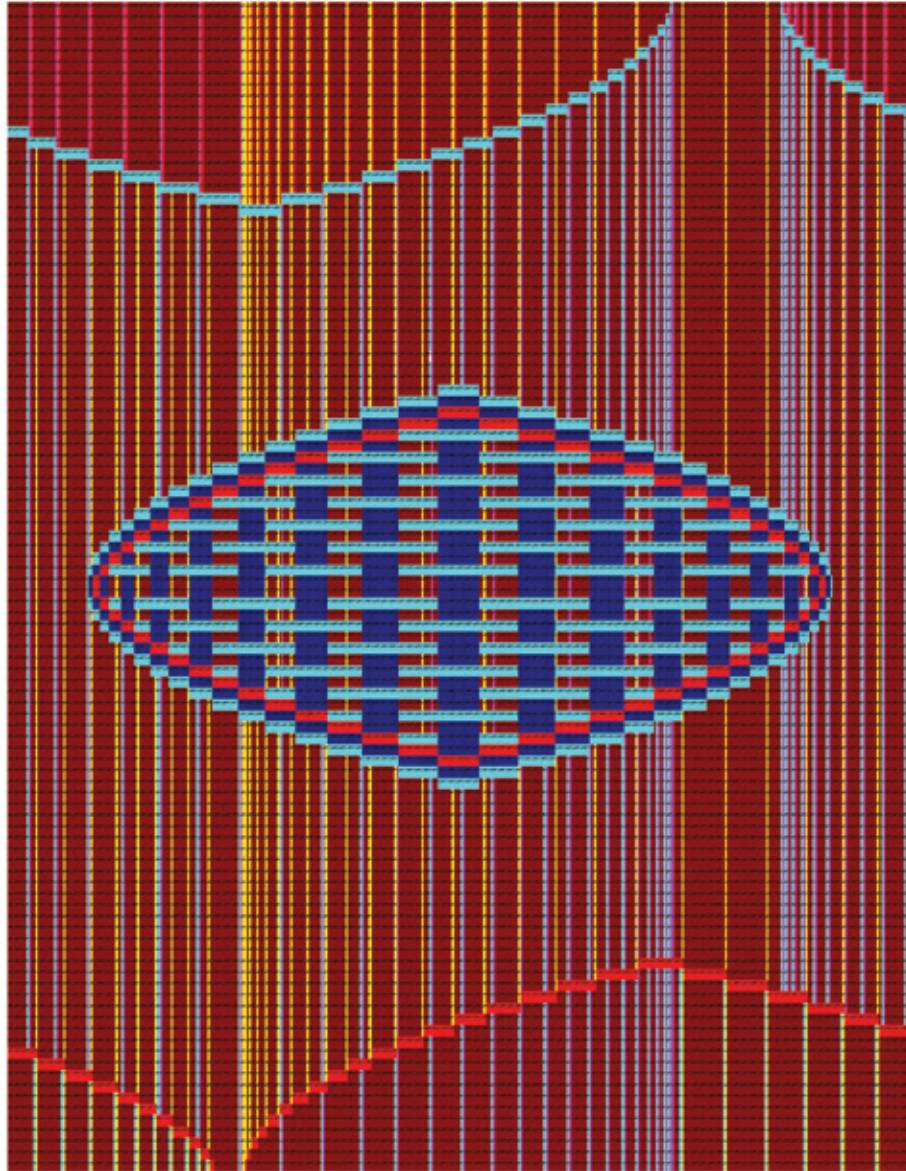1/12th of an inch is equivalent to 12 pixels per inch (the average phone screen is 300 pixels per inch).
Thelma Rosner, "Cross Stitch Paintings" personal website, https://www.thelmarosner.com/mbr_statement.php (accessed 10 October, 2019).
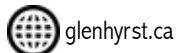Matthew Ryan Smith, "Hip to be Square: The Pixel Revolution in Contemporary Art," Blackflash Magazine 33.1 (Winter, 2016), 38.

Shaheer Zazai, *1114.9*, 2019, produced on Microsoft Word, print on watercolour paper, 14" x 11"

Thelma Rosner, *Cross Stitch #8*, 2016, diptych, oil & graphite on canvas, 8' x 6'.

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