Visions & Fissures

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VISIONS & FISSURES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Art

by
Sarah Kent Butler
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Accepted by:
Todd McDonald, Committee Chair
Sydney Cross
Anderson Wrangle
ABSTRACT

My work references both Early Renaissance paintings and digital technology through highly-saturated and detailed hybrids of painting styles. The religious narratives combined with digital symbols and artifacts of digital processes suggest the spiritual undercurrents surrounding digital technology in its potential for enlightenment, transcendence, and evoking a sense of the infinite. To further clarify the reasoning behind this connection, I discuss three themes. Firstly, the function of illusion in Early Renaissance and in digital space, secondly, the mythology and promise associated with digital space and lastly, the fact that we currently occupy two spaces simultaneously as computer users, and aligning that with Early Renaissance dualism. My work points to the persistence of our desire to be transported by visual means and explores ways the spiritual realm has been represented in the past and today. The resulting paintings evoke a divine encounter, reflecting on both the religious subject matter referenced in Renaissance sources and the mystical aura projected by new technologies.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this body of work and written thesis to my parents, Steve and Kent Butler. Their enthusiasm, wisdom and support have played a tremendous role in giving me the momentum needed to accomplish my goals. Their gracious commitment to family has been a gift and an inspiration.
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The source of all life, truth and beauty will one day restore all things and I thank my God and creator who has blessed me with this opportunity and to whom I give all glory.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I. INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II. EARLY RENAISSANCE DEPICTIONS OF THE SPIRITUAL REALM</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AND THE BEGINNINGS OF LINEAR PERSPECTIVE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III. DIGITAL SPACE AS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE SUBLIME</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IV. DUAL EXISTENCE</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>V. CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURES</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Access Interface</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Level 99</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Vacillating</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. hyperlink</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Prolonging and Proliferating; Syncing the Ensemble</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The Healing</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. in a mirror dimly</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Ad Infinitum</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

From drawing to digital media, the development of technology has enabled us as a society to both comprehend and observe the physical world and conceive of the invisible. My work points to a persistent collective desire to be transported by visual means. I explore historical and contemporary representations of the spiritual realm. The resulting paintings evoke a divine encounter, reflecting on both the religious subject matter referenced in Renaissance sources and the mystical aura projected by new technologies.

I create paintings that address parallels between Early Renaissance culture and how digital technology mediates contemporary lived experience. Both time periods marked a widespread concern with the pursuit of knowledge, launching many significant scientific discoveries and technological developments. Additionally, both time periods demonstrate a concern with an intangible, cerebral world alongside the physical world. The Early Renaissance maintained that the heavens were an actual dimension of the physical world that held more significance than the everyday realm; similarly, contemporary society has a sense of occupying both digital and physical space, with the former often the privileged of the two.

As my work seeks to illuminate parallels between these two eras, the painting compositions include Early Renaissance religious narratives and abstractions that reflect the use of digital editing tools: simulated brushstrokes, copying and pasting. I preserve the trace of my interaction with the Renaissance paintings as mediated by the computer. As I magnify these images of paintings, parts of the image break apart and dissolve,
becoming pixelated or fuzzy. I translate this appearance through paint on canvas. The paintings, therefore, reference the navigation and modification processes intrinsic in a computer-mediated existence, addressing the desire to see and know more and the tendency to idealize the world around us. By allowing digital symbolism to inform the old religious narratives, the paintings develop new narratives.

Instead of using a digital medium to talk about this experience, I incorporate the historicity of oil on canvas or panel to enforce the tension between new and old present in my compositional subject matter. By using an old medium, paint, to speak about a new one, digital technology, I emphasize the medium as a part of the content and not just a lens through which to view content. Another contemporary painter who works in this mode is Corinne Wasmuht, a German artist who paints large-scale cityscapes loaded with imagery. These laboriously crafted paintings are built up in the Old Master style of painting through multiple layers of glazes on a panel surface. Wasmuht’s multi-layered compositions convey a sense of the digital realm—a dreamlike space where many types of space can coexist. The complexity of these compositions and the large scale of the paintings force the viewer to slow down to navigate the space. Similarly, I position the viewer as a navigator, alternating their relationship with the painting as the rules of space change throughout my compositions.

I use alternating types of spatial depiction in hopes that the viewer will acknowledge this world of pictures in which we find ourselves. As the computer screen occupies the position of picture plane, mental space, and portal for interactions unseen, the malleable and subjective perceptual experience of contemporary individuals is
foregrounded as a consistent mode of experiencing the world. Spatial incongruity and
play are themes currently being explored by many contemporary German painters
including Matthias Weischer. Weischer expertly combines multiple types of painting
modes in rendering theatrical interior spaces. The work often initially reads as an illusion
of space only to break apart upon extended viewing. “The picture as a picture is for him
the pre-eminent logic” (Godfrey 230).

By addressing a sense of simultaneity and multiple types of space coexisting, my
painting compositions echo a computer-mediated perceptual experience of the world. I
add to this ongoing discourse within contemporary painting by addressing notions of the
spiritual seen through a digital context. Contemporary photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto
influenced my work as his work often centers on technology as a conduit for the spiritual.
His long-exposure photographs of movie theaters such as Union City Drive In, Union
City (1993) last the duration of a film, resulting in images of light-filled screens and
empty theaters. Sugimoto captures what cannot be seen or understood in its entirety,
pointing to the camera as a mode of condensing and objectifying the passage of time.
Sugimoto’s work addresses the digital sublime in conveying a “sense of being on a
borderline or edge where we can no longer codify experience” (Morley).

My painting process addresses these themes by alternately engaging with both the
computer screen and the painted surface. In creating these paintings, I begin by
constructing collages with Photoshop. I directly quote Early Renaissance paintings and
use them as starting points for my own sketches. Forms and spaces are modified, erased
or embellished. Patterns form based on segments of the original painting that are mirrored
and tiled. Often gestural brushstrokes and remnants of haloes become a substitute for fully-articulated figures. During the gestural abstraction movement of Modernism, gestural brushstrokes became an index for the artist’s presence and time spent with the painting, an affirmation of their existence in the physical world. These visible brushstrokes were also an acknowledgement of the painting as an object, separate from any illusions rendered with the paint. This trace of the individual helps to unify the multiple narratives that arise in my compositions, a symbol of awareness that the world of images is a mediated depiction of the world. While digital artifacts and visual cues of photo-editing software point to an idealized virtual reality, the disjointed space of the Renaissance compositions and the simplistic, almost naïve gesture of the paint tool remind the viewer this ideal space is fraught with roadblocks. By calling attention to the tools used to create illusions, I remind the viewer that one’s understanding of reality is often less concrete than it seems.

By referencing a variety of art historical sources, my paintings address the shifting modes of representing the spiritual realm. The new narratives I construct evoke a divine encounter, reflecting on both the religious subject matter inherent in Renaissance paintings and the mythology surrounding the promises of new technologies. By referencing digital technology and religious narratives, I suggest that both represent the potential for transformation and transcendence.
CHAPTER TWO

DEPICTIONS OF THE SPIRITUAL REALM IN THE EARLY RENAISSANCE AND THE BEGINNINGS OF LINEAR PERSPECTIVE

In the tradition of image making, illusions of observable phenomena have served to make representations of spiritual spaces more believable. By rendering the familiar, the unfamiliar then becomes conceivable. Examples of this idea are present in Early Renaissance paintings. Giotto’s fresco The Ecstasy of St. Francis depicts a miraculous scene in which St. Francis hovers above the ground in a pink cloud, defying gravity. The Gothic-style halo and cloud stand in contrast to the naturalistic faces of the figures, perspectival depiction of space, and realistically lit robes. For an audience of Giotto’s time, this would have been a convincing illusion of a three-dimensional space; therefore the miraculous scene becomes credible. Modeling, or creating a sense of light through the use of value gradations, and linear perspective function together to convey the illusion of three-dimensional space. By retaining flat, abstracted forms such as haloes and patterned fabric and merging them with an illusionistic painting style, the realistic space provided a foil to the spiritual occurrence. Through illusion, the spiritual occurrences then become more believable.

The specific historical location of Early Renaissance art is significant as the first moment the illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface was made possible. In the initial transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, Trecento artists such as Giotto and Duccio combined abstract depictions of the heavens and
celestial phenomena with realistically rendered figures. While artists of the medieval era painted visualizations of the heavens and miraculous occurrences, the Renaissance marked the beginnings of a fascination with depicting the natural world. The origin of linear perspective is based on a mathematical system still in use today, exploiting modes of perception to create a sense of realism. Monocular perception is the basis for linear perspective, while human interactions with the physical world combine views of both eyes into one vision of three-dimensional space. Linear perspective is rooted in the study of optics, whose “geometric concept of light-filled space provided some kind of rationalization of how God’s grace pervaded the universe” (Wiersma). Math signified rational design from a divine source, an idea integrated into both the Christian faith and the development of linear perspective.

Renaissance artists created representations of nature based on how it relates to human perception. In order for the illusion of space to be effective, the viewer had to be positioned at a certain angle and a certain distance away from the painting. By referencing the early use of perspective, I underscore the limitations of linear perspective, as, at this time, it was frequently inaccurate.

The development of linear perspective as a new technology opens up a dialogue with contemporary technologies, in that while both possess promising illusionistic capacities, errors abound. Paintings from the Early Renaissance possess a flawed perspectival execution immediately apparent to contemporary viewers. Similarly, the fact that many Photoshop tools used to create more believable depictions of form and space
are already identifiable to a contemporary viewer suggests a persistent inability to capture the physical world in all of its complexity.
CHAPTER THREE
DIGITAL SPACE AS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE SUBLIME

“Technology... is the product of a profound human desire for transcendence: to be out of body, out of mind, beyond language. Virtual space and dataspace constitute the domain, previously provided by myth and religion, where imagination, desire, and will can reengage the forces of space, time and matter in the battle for a new reality” (Ascott 246)

Many scholars and theorists have pointed to the digital realm as a new mode of experiencing the sublime in that it points to an unknowable space, accessible yet ineffable. Digital technology creates virtual worlds and establishes connections and transactions that are often invisible to Internet users. The Internet is ever expanding due to the endless stream of personal information uploaded lightning-fast- on a basic level this space feels infinite, evading our control. The representation of a perceived infinite aligns with Edmund Burke’s notion of the sublime and the individual’s terror in recognizing they cannot comprehend such a notion.

Advancements in digital technology enable us to see and learn more about our world than was ever possible in previous generations. Invisible data and phenomena are now visually manifest and easily accessible. The seemingly abstract and fluid world of social connections is now visible as quantifiable information. Internet surfers can virtually visit locations across the world via satellite technology and web cameras. Internet search engines enable the public to see a seemingly limitless number of images of almost every conceivable person, place or thing. Paintings such as Access Interface (Fig.1) and Level 99 (Fig.2) address this sense of possibility and exploration with multi-
layered spatial compositions. The repetition of forms hints at the infinite duplicates of imagery made possible through tools such as clone stamp and meme generator applications. The ease with which imagery can be duplicated allows information to be disseminated to communities large and small, near and far. Repetition then becomes an icon of possibility in my paintings, often becoming the focal point and feeding new content into the religious narratives.

Digital technology allows us to enhance our sensory abilities in a variety of modes. Interactive satellite maps simulate an experience of flying over the Earth, transcending the limits of what we are normally able to see and, therefore, what we are able to represent about the world. While technological advancement allows for better vision and understanding of the world, many have an underlying fear of being replaced entirely by machines, as machines are more capable of recording accurate depictions of the world. As cultural theorist Paul Virilio states: “it is as if I was to take my eye, throw it away, and still be able to see… All the qualities of the body are transferred to the machine… We haven’t adjusted yet, we are forgetting our body, we are losing it.. The body is torn and disintegrated” (Druckery 323). The decreased urgency and agency of the embodied experience of the world can allow us to forget our lived experience and privilege the digital personas that can see and do more. In the digital realm, avatars and carefully cultivated online profiles create a digital presence that can transcend space and gain supernatural abilities.

Some of my most recent work incorporates imagery from computer games. Games allow users to conceive of possessing superhuman traits such as the ability to fly
and to self-resurrect. In my painting *Level 99*, a highly saturated landscape features the repeated motif of a toolbar, its perspective shifting within the frame to indicate the computer gamer’s experience over time. The bright emblems in the user interface buttons address the user’s ability to control the avatar’s actions, then becoming a deity in this virtual landscape.

Online games can function as a microcosm of our environment; while the avatars used and space explored is imaginary, the interaction often prompts spiritual reflection on our own existence in the physical world. Contemporary artist Bill Viola has also made use of the spiritual conversation that opens up through navigating a digital body. Viola partnered with USC Game Innovation Lab and created *The Night Journey* (2010), a video game that also functions as a video art piece. Players are encouraged to be mindful of their surroundings while traveling, which is the main ‘action’ that takes place. In this example, enlightenment is connected to an awareness of one’s virtual self within a digital space.

With digital personas, one has the capacity to escape the pains and trials of the physical body. N. Katherine Hayles states, “… perhaps not since the Middle Ages has the fantasy of leaving the body been so widely dispersed through the population and never has it been so strongly linked with existing technologies” (Mosco 97). I address this new relationship we have with our bodies through fragmented figures in *Access Interface*, *Vacillating* (Fig. 3), and *hyperlink* (Fig. 4). In *hyperlink*, white rays perforate St. Francis’ hands and connect the figure to a space beyond the familiar Renaissance picture plane. The stigmata are cartoonish and exaggerated as they connect to and become part of the
background “digital” space. The mirrored planes and gestural marks suggest a Photoshop reference and the possibility of modification and idealization. Space is mirrored and expanded to enforce a moment of significance and address the possibility of the spiritual affecting physical form and space. The segments also suggest a time reel in which the figure undergoes transformation. The repetition of hands and the figure’s interaction with the illuminated space enforce the sense of a supernatural endowment and a moment of transcendence. The relationship of St. Francis with the abstract background hints at a symbiotic relationship between an individual and a larger community, each informing the other in a manner akin to online presence. The painting explores the gap between personal and public and the large frame of the canvas support facilitates the viewer in projecting him or herself into the painted space.

I again use a large-scale format in the painting *Prolonging and Proliferating: Syncing the Ensemble* (Fig.5), to heighten the viewer’s awareness of his bodily relationship with the painting and underscore an imagined capacity to enter into the painted space. The low-resolution imagery in this painting indicates an immersion in a digitized space. By transcribing the low-resolution imagery into a high-resolution form (paint on canvas), I emphasize the medium of digital imagery rather than just the content embedded within the image. The breakdown of the image points to a failure in our tools of representation.

*Level 99* contains a funerary narrative as it references Fillippo Lippi’s painting of the death of St. Jerome. The religious function of the painting is made clear in the delineation of the altarpiece’s curved rectangular form. The form breaks apart to reveal a
vibrant sky, figure and sky joined by a transparent panel of turquoise. The emphasis on
the deceased saint and the turquoise panel connecting him to the background address a
possible rebirth. The toolbars framing the sky surrounding St. Jerome locate the space in
a digital realm. Through exuberant use of color and establishing a connection between the
Renaissance scene and the digital sky space, the painting is hopeful, suggesting the
potential for proliferation of life through digital personas.
CHAPTER FOUR
DUAL EXISTENCE

By addressing multiple types of space in the same frame, my paintings evoke a sense of simultaneity and the potential for interaction between spaces. Voids, fractures and light sources alternately disrupt and harmonize the painted space, creating figure-ground confusion and addressing the potential for fluidity between the tangible and the ephemeral. Contemporary individuals find they can have real and significant experiences in an immaterial realm - cyberspace. In experiencing cyberspace as immaterial, we can conceive of it as a parallel to other representations of a spiritual realm. This intellectual location marks a return to the idea of a soul space alongside an understanding of the importance of the empirically observable, both hallmarks of the Early Renaissance era. In her book *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, Margaret Wertheim describes soul space as an immaterial but very real domain through which the soul can travel. The Early Renaissance depictions of celestial space as a portal for the viewer parallels our current engagement with cyberspace as an immaterial realm of possibility and imagination in which we can project our identities.

My work emphasizes this connection between the Early Renaissance understanding of space and society’s current understanding of cyberspace as a projected mental space existing alongside physical space. The fact that the phrase “In Real Life” is used as a clarifying descriptive in online conversation points not only to this separation between realms but an uncertainty in how to conceive of digital interactions, raising the
question of what makes something real. My personal relationship with digital technology and specifically the Internet is consistently inconsistent. On the one hand, I appreciate and make use of the Internet and digital technology in general as a means to further understand the world and connect with friends. I can virtually tour destinations on the other side of the world and share information with a global community. However, I resist this new technology, as it is a barrier between my immediate surroundings and myself. I fear losing sight of the perceptual experiences I value in the physical world and being emotionally distant in my relationships. The fact that there is no historical precedent for how to exist in the world online is a source of anxiety. This figurative splitting of the body is traumatic and the idea of living in both places at once is overwhelming. Within my paintings, the anxiety this virtual space provokes is evident in the fragmentation of the spaces and the figures. One example of this sentiment is evident in the painting *Vacillating*. In this piece I integrate a contemporary figure into a gridded landscape, referencing a Giovanni di Paolo painting, *St. Clare of Assisi Saving a Child From a Wolf* (1455). In the Di Paolo painting, St. Clare saves a child from a wolf that has bitten off its arm. In my composition a female figure borrowed from a snapshot is rendered with high photographic color saturation and high contrast. The figure is missing one arm, therefore forming a narrative with the wolf to her right. The partially formed figure appears to be fading into the landscape and there are small, highly saturated bits floating around her that hint at potentially rebuilding the body. This confusion over whether the body is being disassembled or reconstructed alludes to the disembodied viewer in the digital realm. Like the Renaissance window into a space, the computer screen acts as a transparent
window. In our interactions with the computer screen, we have the potential to have many windows open at once, and therefore we can inhabit multiple spaces simultaneously. This means the viewer is much less rooted in their body as compared to the window of Renaissance paintings that fix the viewer in front of the space as the convergence point for the imaginary lines of perspective. The roving viewer of digital space is therefore liberated, an expression rendered in the fragmentation of architectural space and repetition of computer “window” frames in Access Interface.

By referencing artwork from the Early Renaissance, I address a time when the beginning fascination with illusions of three-dimensional space merged with a desire to depict the celestial realm. For example, Giotto’s Arena Chapel in Padua is an excellent sample of the Trecento era as it merges developing modes of realism with flat, Gothic space. Evidence of Giotto’s empirical observation in the naturalistic depictions of both human expressions and plant and animal life indicates a newfound concern with the observable world. However, this concern with the material realm had yet to develop into a complete abandonment of medieval soul space. Historian Margaret Wertheim states, “if Giotto reveled in the physical world, he also remained an artist profoundly concerned with the Christian realm of the spirit. At the same time he portrayed the earthy physicality of bodies, he also painted angels illumined by an inner spiritual light” (Wertheim 88).

In both art and literature, the Early Renaissance was caught between physicalism and spiritualism. In a similar vein, the modern individual is both an inhabitant of the physical world and an inhabitant of the immaterial realm of cyberspace. Cyberspace has been described as an emergent phenomenon. This means that cyberspace transcends the
sum of its parts, giving further credibility to the notion of it as a location we can travel to, sublime in that it is difficult to conceive of in its entirety (Wertheim 41). “We inhabit cyberspace when we feel ourselves moving through the interface into a relatively independent world with its own dimensions and rules” (Heim 79). The mysterious nature of cyberspace serves to endow it with a mystical aura. As David Noble points out, this line of thinking—associating technology with mysticism—is not new. To wit, he mentions that at the construction of New Jerusalem, technology was “perceived as a tool for precipitating the promised time of perfection” (Wertheim 42).

The visual manifestation of these thoughts and research broadly convey how society tries to conceive of the spiritual realm in visual terms. In Renaissance paintings, a strong light source often denotes a spiritual experience. Within my paintings, these light sources are replaced by images of supersaturated digital abstractions that disrupt the logic of the Renaissance compositions. In The Healing (Fig.6), walls become fragmented and figures reflect the light and hue of digital effects. By allowing for elements of both digital and art historical sources to inform one another, I establish a dialogue between the two realms. Light plays a central role in my paintings in creating this convergence of space. The light source affects both Renaissance composition and imagery that refers to contemporary digital technology. As a metaphor in painting, illumination is often used to suggest discovery and enlightenment. Through providing ample amounts of data, digital technology enables enlightenment. The computer screen is an LCD panel illuminated by fluorescent lights. The screen suggests a window as it is backlit and framed by a rectangle. The screen also suggests a stained glass window, transforming and activating
narratives with its interior light. Theorist Marshall McLuhan made note of this parallel between medieval stained glass windows and both television and computer screens. These types of media are described as “light-through” media, in which the media acts as a transparent filter of an active light source. As opposed to “light-in” media- opaque sources such as books, newspapers and movie screens- light-through sources have a perceptual effect on the viewer that “draw[s] and command[s] our attention with an almost hypnotic, religious intensity” (Levinson 9). “ ‘The electric light’, McLuhan writes, ‘is pure information’ (UM:x). The vitrine, in church stained-glass windows, is a frame through which light passes. Light as information takes on meaning as filtered through the stained glass” (Genosko 167). As light is a symbol of enlightenment, it becomes an operative figure in my compositions, informing the digital abstractions surrounding it with the importance of a portal into a world of knowledge and understanding.

As I visualize the experience of navigating the digital realm, I use glitch imagery, which often appears as highly saturated abstract fragments or patterns, as in in a mirror dimly (Fig.7). A glitch makes the viewer aware of the very logic and order it betrays. I paint the trace of this action as a record of my desire to engage with this space and as an acknowledgement of the limitations of the technology. In in a mirror dimly, a digitally abstracted halo forms a pattern that contains pixelated sections of sky. This pixilation again appears in green rectangles on the mountain, the repetition creating a dialogue between these two sections in the setting. The glitch effects are artifacts of zooming in to see more of parts of the painting, only to be confronted with the breakdown of image resolution. The pixilation is a remnant of navigation in the realm of digital images and
implies a desire to see and potentially know more. This sentiment is also evident in Renaissance aspirations to record detail and visual understanding of the natural world. In Access Interface, the armature of Andrea Previtali’s Annunciation (1508) is disrupted and fractured. A pattern based on the Windows software logo as well as pieces of the figures in the Previtali painting becomes a pulsing neon figure advancing toward the viewer, its light permeating the multi-layered space. This repetition of windows in both the contemporary and Renaissance references reflects an unending cultural desire for portals of escape.

My painting Ad Infinitum (Fig. 8) references Fillipo Lippi’s Adoration in the Forest (1459). The figures are emphasized through their absence, their bodies erased to show a layer of abstract pattern, glowing green. The geometric shapes and highly saturated colors suggest a space entirely separate from the landscape image, yet the passageways integrate the two spaces. The hands at the top of the Lippi composition form a pattern emphasizing the holy figure as a focal point. Digital tools are used to emphasize the spiritual narrative within the Lippi painting and address this moment within the composition as an opening into another realm that is ephemeral and immaterial. By erasing the forms of the figures within the painting, I emphasize the portal nature of digital space and also use that as a metaphor for spiritual encounters and striving to access a space beyond one’s physical surroundings.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Through combining references to spiritual narratives and digital technology, my paintings function as mediations on human desire to be transported through visual means. The paintings allow for intertwining narratives across time periods through symbols culled from the contemporary and the Early Renaissance. I feel it’s important to look at our culture in light of the past as a means to make sense of our experience in an increasingly rapidly shifting society. My experience growing up when the Internet first became widely available has significantly impacted my fascination with shifting modes of perceiving the world. Cyberspace with its endless databanks has become “‘nature’ for postmodern man” (Lyotard 51). This digital scenery has become so integrated into my life that I feel it is important to examine critically, attempting to understand and consider the cognitive and perceptual results.

As a body, my paintings refer to the history of image making and hint at elusiveness in capturing the world around us. By depicting not only digital symbols but also the processes we engage in as computer users, I seek to prompt the viewer in recognizing these actions as access points to the sublime and the incomprehensible. By referencing a broad range of time periods, the work addresses the history of illusions and our collective and persistent strivings to access a world beyond the everyday.
Figure 1: *Access Interface*

Oil on panel, 18”x18”x2”, 2012
Figure 2: *Level 99*

Oil on panel, 16”x12”x2”, 2012
Fig. 3: Vacillating

Oil on canvas, 50”x55”x1”, 2012
Fig. 4: hyperlink

Oil on canvas, 62”x53”x1”, 2012
Fig. 5: Prolonging and Proliferating; Syncing the Ensemble

Oil on canvas, 60”x68”x1”, 2012
Fig. 6: *The Healing*

Oil on canvas, 48”x60”x1”, 2011
Fig. 7: *in a mirror dimly*

Oil on canvas, 60”x48”x1”, 2011
Fig.11: *Ad Infinitum*

Oil on canvas, 58”x48”x1”, 2012


