

## Fooled: the effect of technology on painting.

The Chuck Close filter and a case-study of an app.

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The value of paintings is at the core of the art market. What does technology change about the value of paintings as objects and painting as a practice that required years of apprenticeship? This brief visual essay focuses on my personal experience with an app as a case study and the Chuck Close filter to examine the possible effects of digital media on the value of painting.

From 2001 onward, artist-programmer Scott Blake developed the Chuck Close photoshop filter which manipulates photographs so that they appear to be paintings by the artist Chuck Close. The effect is convincing. In 2010, Chuck Close threatened legal action. As Blake points out: "Close is the 14th richest living artist, worth a staggering \$25 million. I really don't think any work I make is going to "jeopardize" his career or his livelihood." ( Scott Blake, Hyperallergic, <http://hyperallergic.com/54104/my-chuck-close-problem/> )

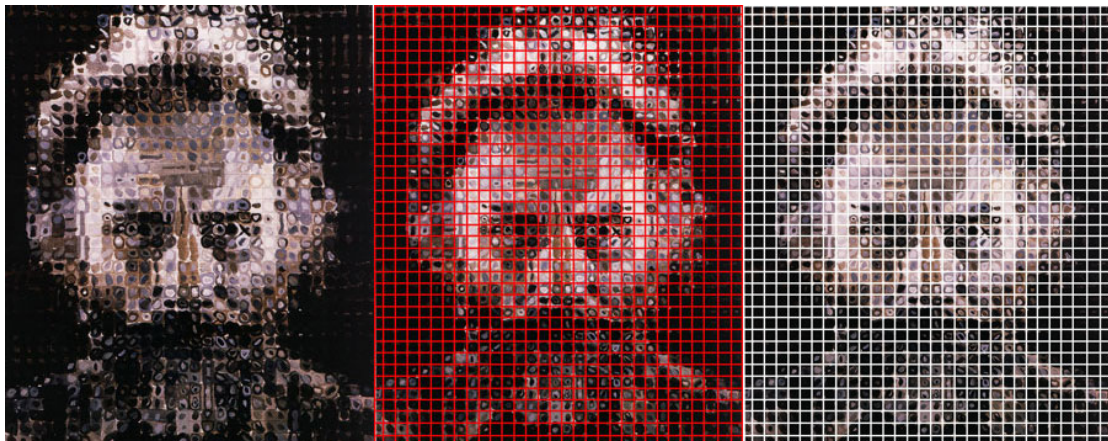


Figure 1. From left to right: Chuck Close's painting of Lucas; Blake dissecting the mosaic in Photoshop; 847 mosaic tiles



Figure 2. From left to right: Scott Blake's version of Lucas, version of Phillip made with Lucas tiles, self-portrait with Lucas tiles

The programmer-artist Blake also points out that aspects of early computer art anticipated Chuck Close's style. In fact, from this perspective the value of Close's style seems to be borrowed or derivative. The question of ownership of a style is too large for the scope of this essay, but obviously the idea that one human being can claim to originate aesthetic techniques independently of culture is a fallacy. Yet painters have for centuries marketed their works on the basis of superior craftsmanship, techniques and capacity for sensitive perception. Computation challenges those values.

Consider the following digital work (that Blake uses one of his examples):

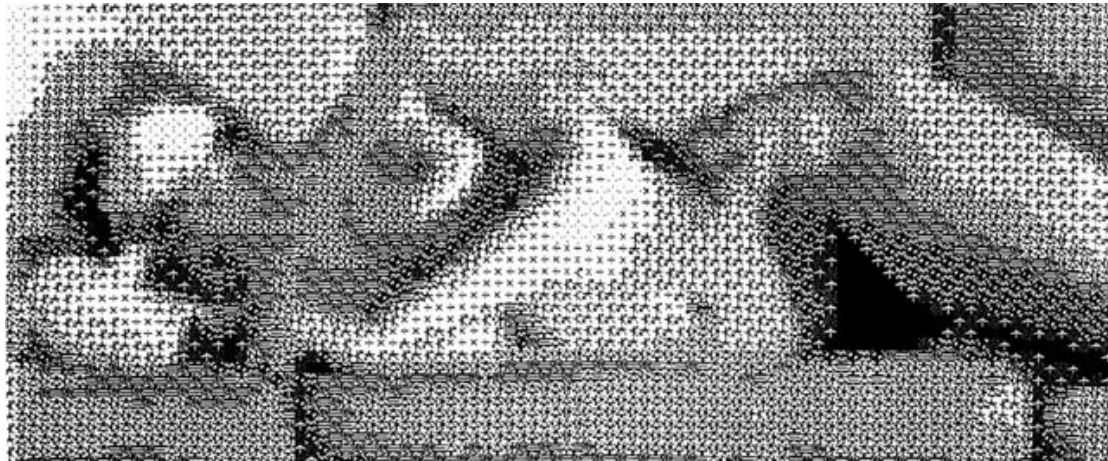


Figure 3 Leon Harmon & Ken Knowlton, "Studies in Perception #1" (1966), computer-produced mural, as shown in the 1968 MoMA "Machine" show, 5 x 10 feet (© Leon Harmon & Ken Knowlton)

This work displays many of the formal qualities that Chuck Close claims to own: pixilation, circular figures within the pixels. It predates Close's work.

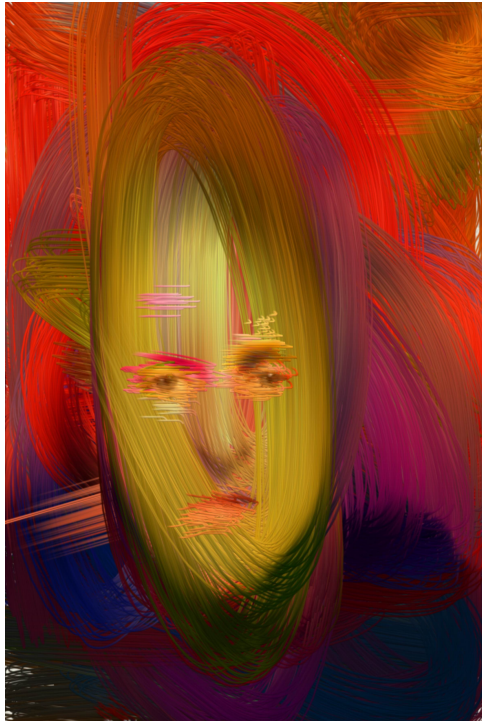


Now let's consider a contemporary (perhaps more trivial example). A few weeks ago (in April 2013) I downloaded an ios app called *Foolproof Art Studio for iphone*. It is a simple touch-screen app that allows the user to load/take a photo, then manipulate that photo using various 'brushes' assigned to the finger.

The first image I loaded was a photo I took of a tiny bit of a Vik Muniz painting. Within a few minutes I had converted it into the following.

Figure 4. Homage to Vik Muniz. Completed in several minutes using *Foolproof Art Studio* on iPod Touch 5<sup>th</sup> Gen

What skill did the creation of this work require? A button press and a few smears. Is it remarkably different than many other valuable gestural portraits? Does this app threaten painting's value?



Obviously this app has a signature style just like an artist. Is the programmer who made it and marketed an artist? Are all the works made by the software actually works by him/her? Does this destroy notions of craft? Or displace them into code? Is there any value in representational portraiture?

There are more questions than answers.

Figure 5. Homage to Zippy the Pinhead. (Less than a minute work using *Foolproof Art Studio* on iPod Touch 5<sup>th</sup> Gen)

The app can easily allow an untrained individual to emulate the styles and gestural signatures of artists like Francis Bacon.

It challenges notions of elite value. It makes it possible to replicate quickly with neither talent, training or any costly materials, paintings. If they physically existed, these paintings would be worth something.



What do these examples show? They reveal that digital technology destabilizes value in traditional art domains.

Figure 6. Homage to Francis Bacon (Time: 2 minutes using *Foolproof Art Studio* on iPod Touch 5<sup>th</sup> Gen)

Post-note: The author of this essay has contemplated taking several of these digital images to talented painter-counterfeiters in Dafun and having them remade as paintings, physical art objects. Then they could be exhibited in a gallery as art and sold under a fake name.

