ARTIST'S VOICE

C24: You have been involved with computer graphics in the movie industry from the early days and have had an illustrious career in that field. What brought your focus back to fine art photography?

AC: I have always been interested in photography. A few years back I had actually stopped doing computer graphics and was practicing traditional b&w darkroom photography. I was doing street photography. I was more surprised to find that I still had an interest in computer graphics. This was about six years ago when I found myself at home alone trying to figure out if Machine Learning could make pictures.

C24: The late Benjamen Chinn, best known for his photography of San Francisco Chinatown, was your uncle and Lenore Chinn, well-regarded artist and LGBTQ+ activist is your cousin. With these family ties, do you feel any added pressure as an artist?

AC: Absolutely not. Each of us has forged our own path. My family was primarily a family of engineers. Ben was in engineering, I was in computer science, Lenore's father was a mathematician. Artists were the outliers in our large family. Ben noticed which of his nieces and nephews had artistic ability and very quietly watched over us. He recognized and understood the artistic mind, and he encouraged us.

Portrait of Behjamen Chinn by Imogene Cunningham

C24: You use the latest technology to create the various series in this solo exhibition, yet you choose to print most of the images in the darkroom by making traditional B&W gelatin silver prints. Why?

AC: Traditional b&w gelatin silver (darkroom) prints made look better. There's no comparison. While the quality of archival pigment (inkjet) prints are exceptional today, when I look at the two side by side, I always pick the darkroom print. That being said, I find that working in the darkroom is a really frustrating activity. You do have to put in your 10,000 hours to get good at it. And along the way you have to learn how to manage and deal with a lot of frustration.

C24: Automatism is a term borrowed from physiology, where it describes bodily movements that are not consciously controlled. The French poet André Breton who launched the surrealist movement in 1924 defined surrealism in the Manifesto of Surrealism as such:

'Pure psychic automatism ... the dictation of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all moral or aesthetic concerns'.

Do you consider the images generated by A.I. and machine learning neural network a form of automatism? If you do, and assuming the datasets used are unfiltered, then do you think these images reflect the "uncontrolled" psyche of humanity as a whole or just a glimpse of certain population?

Kiss #25

Eric and Djalia

AC: I do agree with the statement, but would definitely be specific about the contents of the datasets. These datasets are scraped from the internet, so I would say the images reflect the "uncontrolled" psyche of the internet. But what's in the internet? For example, one of the early datasets, still in use today, is "CelebA". "CelebA" contains photos of celebrities scraped from the internet, and thus they are People magazine style photos. If you train your neural network on "CelebA", your network will think most people look like celebrities, i.e., young, beautiful, primarily white, healthy with clear skin. That's a bias. And people mostly post nice looking photos of themselves on the internet, and not the ugly ones. So, the internet is biased.

On the subject of automatism, the images from *Front and Profile* and *Photobooth Kiss* represent a change in how I view the computer. For years, the computer graphic imagery I made has always had a very specific geometry. I would render cones and spheres and Shrek, and the programs always painted within the confines of the underlying geometry. It would literally only "paint within the lines".

With *Front and Profile*, and *Photobooth Kiss*, this was the first time in my life that I felt the computer was actually "sketching." The computer was making unsure strokes and drawing tentative shapes. I could see it trying to draw the silhouette of a human profile, and see it make mistakes. This was new to me.

C24: For the "SAGAN" series, your subjects, including yourself, were tasked with taking 800 self-portraits. How long did each session take and did you provide any directions remotely other than "press the shutter release?" Did you glean any insights about your subjects from these portrait sessions?

Man #2, 2021

AC: For starters, I have to explain why the subjects took their own portraits. We were in the middle of the pandemic, before the vaccines. We couldn't get close to each other for the extended period of time it took to take the 800 photos. That's why I gave them a remote control trigger so they could take the pictures themselves.

Each person (subject) is different. I treated it the same way a director works with actors, that is, I tailored my approach for each actor. For Man #2, Ferris Plock, I gave him very deliberate cues designed to evoke different thoughts in his head. This was tough on Ferris because we were in the middle of the lockdown and we all had a lot going on in our heads. So, I give him credit for going through that for me.

For Woman #1, Deana Collins, she did not even want me to watch. I gave her the remote control trigger, and she told me to walk away and not look at her while she shot. So, Deana ended up having a very personal and private encounter with the camera. And she ended up taking a set of photos of herself that were far better than anything I could have taken. I know Deana pretty well, but when I saw the photos, I saw things in her I had never seen before. These were things she would only reveal in private to the camera, but not to me.

So, having to navigate the quarantine produced more interesting portraits. I have since thought this would be a great photographic project by itself – to make a complete series of portraits, where the subject takes the actual photo. This would be a hybrid selfie/portrait. I would set the stage, but they would take the photo.

ARTIST'S VOICE

ADAM CHIN

C24: The past informs the present and the present shapes the future. How is your present body of work on Machine Learning informed by the past and how do you think this technology could shape your photography practice going forward?

AC: In 1986 I made a short one-minute computer animated film, "Opéra Industriel". It was about robots and consciousness. The film took a year to make and won a couple of animation awards. As I think about it, it shouldn't be surprising that today I'm asking the same questions. But I'm still surprised.

Six years ago when I first looked at image making via Machine Learning, it couldn't do much. It had a slow startup. Now the technology has finally hit its stride and has gone viral. For the near future, there will be plenty of areas to explore. It's a brand new medium and there is plenty of low-hanging fruit.

Still, the one question I have with every AI-based project is this: "Is this a good thing or is this a bad thing?" We're now aware of our responsibility to think through the consequences of our technology.

C24: Digital photography revolutionized the medium and the proliferation of camera phones made it accessible to just about everyone. With the rapid development and wide application of A.I., do you think a text-to-image program like "DALL-E" would once again shift the paradigm?

Man #46

Man #122

AC: The "text-to-image" viral tidal wave is hitting us hard right now. It's so new, so hot, and so strange, that I'm not really sure what the ultimate impact of this technology will be. It's too soon to tell. I spent a good deal of time this spring, after making the "a man eating sushi" images, trying to figure out what else I wanted to make with it, and more importantly, what I wanted to say with it. In the end, I wasn't happy with anything I came up with, so I've stopped for now. As an image maker and as an artist, I can tell you that this thing really screws with your head.

C24: Included in this exhibition are a number of photos you took at the San Francisco Pride Parade over the years. You have been photographing this event since the 1980's, do you have any plans for this body of work?

AC: Not really, other than I will continue to do it. I took a number of years off from doing photography in the 1990's and early 2000's. I got busy with work and other interests. In retrospect, this was a mistake. If you like taking photos, you shouldn't stop shooting.

My uncle, Benjamen Chinn, would take photos at the Pride Parade every year. He would walk to the parade from his home in Chinatown, even until he was in his 70's. After he died, I thought I would go back to the parade and photograph, just to see what he was seeing. I got my medium format camera out of the closet, this was around 2008, and have been going back ever since. So, I credit Ben for getting me started in photography again.

Adam Chin

C24: What is your next project?

AC: In the last year and a half there's been an advancement in rendering quality for AI based images. Images are now starting to look more photographic. (That was one of the advancements of DALL-E2 over DALL-E.)

I'm working on a new series of images for next year that I can't really talk about yet, but one of the big differences is that it's going to look more photographic than my earlier series.

I'm also considering making more portraits likes SAGAN, but also using this new rendering method.

And I was recently at a computer conference and found they had updated the algorithm I used to make the mugshots. It too, can now use the new rendering method. Which means I could go back and re-make my mugshot images and they would now look more photographic. So, remaking the mugshots is always an option. But having a more photographic looking mugshot would not necessarily make a better piece of art. There's something to be said for the sketchiness of the existing mugshots. It's like you get to watch the computer struggle, and that adds a lot to the experience.

Still, now that this technology is really rolling, there's no end to the projects for me to do.