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MARCH 2019 - "THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

AMY SCHISSEL "HYPER-ATLAS" GALERIE PATRICK MIKHAIL

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Amy Schissel, Installation view, Patrick Mikhail Gallery, Montreal

Amy Schissel

“Hyper-Atlas”

Galerie Patrick Mikhail

Montreal

November 10 – December 31, 2018

By JAMES D. CAMPBELL, November, 2018

In this exhibition of new works on paper, Amy Schissel projects a world. In her aptly-titled *Hyper-Atlas* (2018), she has essayed a vast cartography of the infoworld, Net space, the cyberworld, charting its fluid latitudes and longitudes with uncanny precision. Indeed, this 90-foot-long by nine-foot wide painting on paper or, better, palimpsest, snakes its way through the gallery space like a hand-made celestial atlas on legs.

Using only traditional drawing materials (graphite, charcoal, acrylic, ink), the artist nurtured it through a period of 14 months incubation time. The scope and grandeur of this work—perhaps the finest attempt that this critic has seen at rendering the dizzying ethos of the information net outside digital artwork – is as notable as it is daunting.



Amy Schissel, Gateway Series #4, 2017, acrylic, graphite, charcoal and ink on paper, 46 x 47 inches

Seeing the artist industriously working its surface in the gallery space, nestled diminutively next to its unfurled expanse as though tattooing it with magic symbols, was to be reminded of the sheer wealth of stored labour inside the work. Her deft movements alongside its flank suggests a sort of stealthy, ongoing algorithmic passage, as she drew out radius, vector, rift, vortex and traced out what resembled mountain crests and perilous eyries, amidst garden-variety geometrics, with her own fingertips. The honey-comb-like structures delineated across the undulating surface suggest myriad niches for infobits and bytes, while

gaps open upon a black sea of infinity, a cosmogonic backdrop space, a proverbial darkness on the face of the deep.

The tonal nuances are staggering. At one moment, we are reminded of the imagery of Katsushika Hokusai, with its chorus of mountains and water. [1] At another, the synaptic firings and axon-dendrite trees that figure so prominently in John von Neumann's seminal *The Computer and the Brain* (1958) explode like signal flares. [2] As a culture, we are knee-deep in sundry digital art explorations of our online reality. But the involute, luminous integers and teeming minutiae so deftly rendered in the hands-on handmade facture here are endlessly engaging and entirely new. Schissel's resplendent handiwork is a sort of transcendental coding.



Amy Schissel, Post Digital Landscapes Series #6, 2017, acrylic, graphite, charcoal and ink on paper, 22.5 x 18 inches

The overall field induces vertigo and *frisson* as one negotiates the volatile cyber-frontier in this delineation of the deep web—littered with dead bytes, abandoned data and defunct URLs. But the ominous atmosphere – it is always twilight here, lit up with starbursts and sparks flying from electricals and wormholes -- reminds us of the Upside Down parallel universe of the Stranger Things TV series. We are also reminded that the suggestion of the Dark Web, only a hop, skip and a jump of keyboarding away, is home to a virulent underworld with a long reach, where designer drugs and sophisticated weaponry are openly

traded, where perps lurk and malingers and hatch plots, and outcasts from the intelligence services gather to discuss wetwork, tradecraft and memories of halcyon days.



Amy Schissel, Post Digital Landscapes Series #1, 2017, acrylic, graphite, charcoal and ink on paper, 22.5 x 18 inches

Also included in the exhibition are two suites of new paintings on paper. *Post Digital Landscapes Series #1 -- #8* and *Gateway Series #1 -- #4* and the large stand alone work *New World Order* (2017) Together, they offer a comprehensive summary of Schissel's current explorations into a coruscating space of simulation and excess, again with no

recourse to digital tools. This artist bridges the gap between the amorphous space of the Net and that of the human life world with consummate finesse. For her, the universe is repletely porous, interpenetrated with data bits and in a state of wholesale flux. The pure information stream and the flotsam and jetsam of the online world achieve radical adequation in the form of a 'last wave' and the premonitory dreams that mark the end of a cycle.



Amy Schissel, New World Order, 2017, acrylic, graphite, charcoal and ink on paper 81 x 52 inches

The cartography here is simply radiant: Schissel's maps attempt to translate and embody the flow of information itself, letting it wash over her like Spring rain as she tirelessly

works the palimpsest. But the Dark Web beckons from just beneath the surface of her imagery and possesses a powerful undertow. It is interesting to note that Schissel's first step in making *Hyper-Atlas* is to paint her paper jet black, never leaving it white. A word concerning her palette: it is characteristically restrained. Colour enters into the white, black and grey array in a subtle and non-decorative way.

Spending time with Schissel's work further reminded me of James Gleick's seminal book *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood*, with its lively discussion of the thought of Claude Shannon, the American mathematician who proposed a general theory of information in 1948 and the theories of physicist John Archibald Wheeler. [3]

Gleick surveys the "flood" – the sheer torrent of data and information that now threatens to swallow us whole. This cascading info flow is at the heart of Schissel's work as she channels it: unstoppable, ever mutating, increasing, unceasing. Information may not be synonymous with knowledge, but Schissel has lent it new aesthetic meaning. In her coded lexicon, her own latter-day Morse code if you will, she engages in a continuing process of reciprocal translation: imagined bits to incarnate signs; forebrain to fingers as she embroiders and unfurls a universe undreamt of by Mercator and still largely uncharted.

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