

RE-EXAMINATION OF DIGITAL PAINTING IDENTITY DEFINITION BASED ON THE PERSPECTIVE OF MEDIUM SPECIFICITY THEORY

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Abstract. The medium specificity theory posits that each art form possesses irreducible or irreplaceable artistic conventions, including specific visual effects or practical processes. However, numerous scholars directly define digital painting as a replication or continuation of traditional physical painting, subsequently interpreting or evaluating its artistic value based on the artistic conventions of physical painting. This cognitive misalignment of identity has resulted in the specific artistic conventions of digital painting not receiving sufficient attention and discussion, thereby preventing its artistic value from being properly evaluated within academic communities. On this basis, this study will adopt a perspective grounded in the theory of medium specificity to argue that digital painting is not merely a continuation or replication of physical painting. It has developed a visual language of painting with distinct digital features, leveraging advancements in digital imaging technology. The specific functions of graphics software and graphic programming tools have replaced the traditional practice or strategies associated with using brushes. Overall, this study aims to dismantle the cognitive constraints imposed by physical painting conventions, proposing a more rational perspective for identifying digital painting. This approach enables academic communities to recognise and evaluate the artistic value of digital painting more effectively.

Keywords: *digital painting, medium specificity, identity definition, visual effects, practice process*

Introduction

Digital painting has evolved over more than 60 years, yet its artistic value and whether it can be considered a form of art remain debated (Yin, 2022; Li, 2020). This study argues that the core reason for this predicament lies in the fact that many artists or scholars view digital painting as a replication or continuation of traditional physical painting (LeRue, 2024; Mikholap, 2021), subsequently applying the artistic conventions of physical painting to construct, interpret, or evaluate digital painting. This approach has resulted in insufficient attention and discussion of the unique visual effects and practical processes that distinguish digital painting from physical painting. Consequently, digital painting struggles to be recognised as a genuine art form possessing artistic value. The medium specificity theory inspires the above perspective. This theory aims to guide scholars in questioning the specific artistic conventions that cannot be reduced or replaced in particular art forms, especially referring to specific visual effects and practical processes (Greenberg, 2018; Palin, 2018; Chierico, 2016), thereby establishing the identity definition of that art form. The formation of specific artistic conventions is directly related to the materiality of the particular medium (materials and tools) employed by that art form (Elkins, 2019; Palin, 2018).

For example, painters utilise the material properties of oil paints (such as the granular texture imparted by rock pigments) or the traces/brushstrokes left by the application of

paint to create oil painting gestures, including techniques like glazing, sgraffito, impasto, scumbling, and alla prima (Zhuravlea, 2023; Rampazzi et al., 2017; Izzo et al., 2014). These terms refer to specific texts and images concerning the particular visual effects and practices of oil painting, serving as effective materials for describing and summarising the identity definition of oil painting (Elkins, 2019; Palin, 2018). The painting theorist Elkins (2019) defines oil painting (Elkins' discussion of painting's identity is grounded in oil painting) as a “bodily art”, which “has to do more intimately with the act itself: the muscles that burn after repeated gestures, the thin sweat of constant activity, the rubbing and caressing of paint against paint.” This constitutes a general description of the practical process and results (the traces on the canvas) of various oil painting gestures, thereby signifying the identity of oil painting. Evidently, from the perspective of medium specificity, identifying and understanding digital painting through conventions rooted in physical mediums (such as oil paints) fundamentally constitutes a cognitive misalignment of identity. This leads to any related discussions about digital painting becoming invalid (e.g., defining/ concepts, artistic value, artistic characteristics, or its place in painting history), making it necessary to re-examine the identity of digital painting.

Materials and Methods

Overview of research methods and strategies

This study employs a qualitative research strategy, which involves systematically analysing non-numerical data such as texts, interviews, and observations to understand the meanings, experiences, and processes within social phenomena. Specifically, this study primarily draws upon the fundamental viewpoint of medium specificity theory as the perspective for proposing and discussing the research issues. The primary sources for discussing this research issue come from two aspects: first, relevant literature concerning the identity definition and artistic conventions (practical processes or visual effects) of digital painting; second, interview data from relevant artists. Therefore, this study employed a literature review method to collect research closely related to the study issue, followed by the organisation, extraction, and categorisation of perspectives (Snyder, 2019). Semi-structured interviews were also employed, conducted via social media (Instagram) and email (Taherdoost, 2022; Saarijärvi and Bratt, 2021), focusing on the painting practices and strategies of three relevant artists using graphic software or an imaging algorithm tool. This is because the literature on practical aspects is relatively scarce and requires supplementation to more effectively discuss and substantiate the viewpoints this study intends to address.

Overview of Medium Specificity Theory

The theory of medium specificity gradually matured through the work of art critic Greenberg (2018). He argued that to establish the identity of an art form possessing genuine artistic value, one must continually eliminate the artistic effects achievable through other art forms or mediums, persistently questioning the irreducible artistic characteristics of a specific art form (This idea was influenced by literary theorist Gotthold Lessing, philosopher Immanuel Kant, and the Formalists) (Greenberg, 2018; 1940; Palin, 2018). Following a series of critical studies, Greenberg (1940) posited that the flat surface, the shape of the support, and the properties of the pigment constitute the

core elements defining painting's specific artistic characteristics. Among these, the flat surface (flatness) is a characteristic that cannot be reduced to or replaced by any other visual form in all categories of painting (Greenberg, 2018; Shen, 2010). Meanwhile, other scholars have further developed the properties of the pigment into artistic characteristics for identifying specific painting categories (e.g., oil painting, ink painting, watercolour), establishing them as crucial elements in identity definition to particular paintings.

For example, the painting gestures mentioned earlier in the oil painting demonstrate the unique visual artistic characteristics (*Figure 1*) that oil paint and brushes impart to oil paintings, serving as crucial information for identifying the painting's identity. Research on Chinese ink painting has also identified corresponding painting gestures, such as Splashing (泼) and Wrinkling (皴), as well as Flying White (飞白), Rubbing (擦), and Reverse Brushwork (翻笔) (Wang and Cheng, 2024). These techniques reveal the distinctive visual characteristics of Chinese ink painting, shaped by the unique properties of rice paper, ink, and brushes (*Figure 2*). Therefore, the fundamental definition of Chinese ink painting is described as a traditional Chinese painting form executed on rice paper by blending water and ink to create varying degrees of density. Primarily using ink as its main material, it achieves unique “ink charm” expressions through controlling water content to produce variations such as thick ink (浓墨), light ink (淡墨), dry ink (干墨), wet ink (湿墨), burnt ink (焦墨) (Yang and Zhao, 2012).

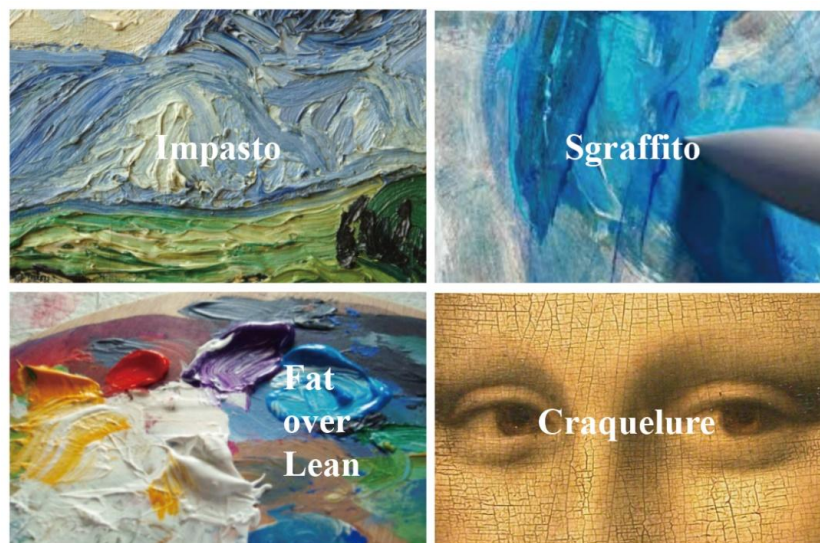


Figure 1. Some visual effects of oil painting gestures.

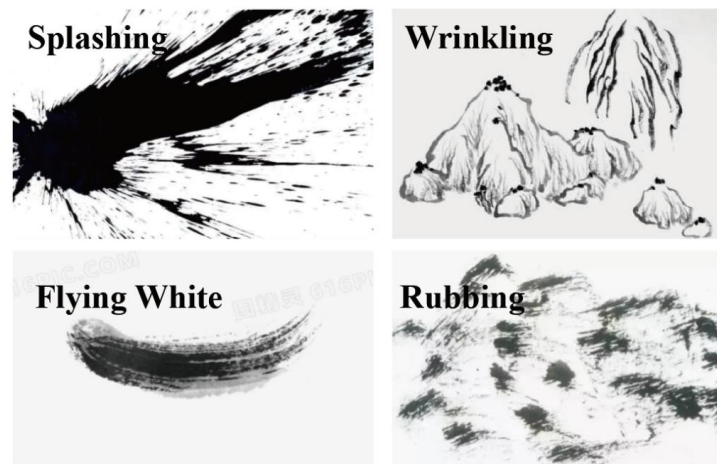


Figure 2. Some visual effects of oil painting gestures.

Indeed, some scholars have also noted that digital mediums, such as graphics software or image editing algorithms, can generate new visual languages in painting (Frew, 2022; Robinson, 2022). Frew (2022), a researcher in new media art theory, subsequently summarised 13 distinct painting languages characterised by digital features. These include atomisation, digital sfumato, derezzing, fragmentation, glitching, and others (Figure 3). However, it should be noted that this research concerns post-digital painting styles of painting that use physical painting mediums to simulate the features of digital imaging (Figure 4). They are not digital paintings in the strictest sense. However, the practice of such painting involves using digital mediums (software or algorithms) to explore new painting languages (Frew, 2022; Robinson, 2022), suggesting that digital mediums can generate new painting languages. In other words, digital painting possesses its own visual aesthetic conventions, independent of physical painting (Speidel, 2018; Alcaraz, 2016).

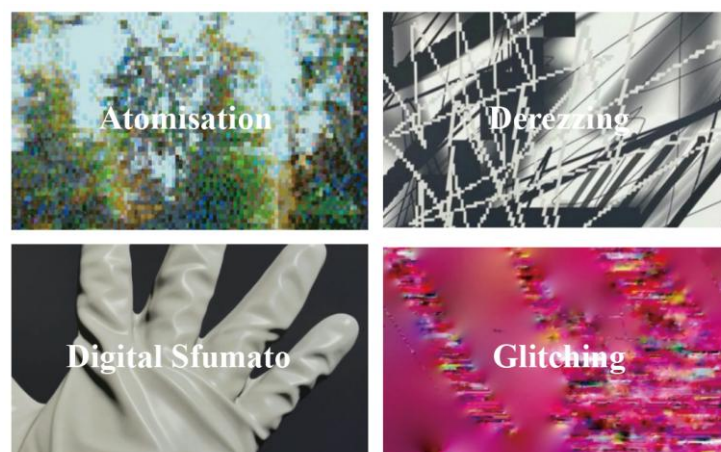


Figure 3. Some visual effects of painting gestures with digital features, collection digital feature: Painting after new media art.



Figure 4. *Zebra study.*

Finally, it should be noted that the development of medium specificity theory to date has not focused only on visual characteristics (continuing the tradition of formalism) but has also addressed the practical processes that achieve specific visual effects (Palin, 2018). According to The Chicago School of Media Theory, medium specificity can be understood as “the quality of being specific, in operation (practice process) and effect (visual effect), to the character of the raw material being used as a mode of artistic expression.” As Elkins (2019) states, to an artist, a picture is both a sum of ideas and a blurry memory of “pushing paint,” breathing fumes, dripping oils and wiping brushes, smearing and diluting and mixing”, and “paint incites motions, or the thought of motions, and through them it implies emotions and other wordless experiences.” This is also why this study employs the term ‘artistic conventions’ rather than ‘artistic characteristics’ to describe the subject of medium specificity theory research, because the level of discussion involves not only visual characteristics but also a series of practical processes/strategies.

Results and Discussion

Cognitive misalignment in digital painting identity definition

From the perspective of medium specificity, specific mediums constitute the particular visual effects and practical processes of specific painting categories (descriptions of painting gestures typically comprise two parts), thereby highlighting the identity of specific painting categories as art forms possessing distinct artistic value. Thus, defining digital painting as a replication or continuation of physical painting, and employing the conventions of physical painting to identify and interpret digital painting constitutes a cognitive misalignment in terms of identity. Yet such a situation is common within academia. For example, scholars such as Sugiarto et al. (2021) suggest: “Digital painting is the adaptation of traditional painting techniques using graphic software, enabling faster, simpler creation with diverse digital tools for artistic expression.” Similar viewpoints abound, though they are not exhaustively listed here (LeRue, 2024; Mikholap, 2021; Manuika, 2018; Samah et al., 2016) (*Figure 5*).

Meanwhile, numerous educational texts on digital painting guide creators to understand and learn digital painting based on the conventions of physical painting (Deshpande, 2021; Bloom, 2012; Sutton, 2007). For instance, digital painting educator Bloom (2012) advises practitioners to “get close to the canvas or paper and study the brushwork, colour palette employed, composition, and the nature of the medium (oil, pastels, charcoals, watercolours, etc.)” She further states, “The more you understand about the medium, the more successful your digital versions will be.”



Figure 5. Digital paintings and brushes that simulate/replicate the visual effects of physical painting.

Source: Bloom (2009); Sutton (2007).

Against this background of identity definition, numerous scholars and artists have habitually questioned the visual effects and practical experience of digital painting based on the conventions of physical painting. These very shortcomings are precisely why the artistic value of digital painting is called into question. For instance, in visual aspects, painter/scholar LeRue (2024) remarked, “I missed the process of ‘fat over lean,’ [...] which was not replicable with the software.” Or as scholar noted, “digital paintings lack richness of texture; they are flat, sleek [...]” This points to digital paintings lacking the rich visual effects provided by physical materials, resulting in overly thin visual effects. At the practical aspects, scholars have pointed out that “digital painting [...] employs virtual numbers for painting in computer-based art, with brushes, paper, canvas, and so forth all being virtual entities [...] compared with traditional painting, it lacks the direct sensory experience of the human body's instinctual sensory system.” This consequently “weakens the physical and mental attributes of human beings, and is inadequate in the expression of human emotions.” Under the influence of similar arguments, scholar directly asserts: “In fact, digital painting, whether termed digital watercolour, digital oil painting, or digital engraving, cannot be categorised as painting. It lacks the value embodiment of traditional painting's spirituality and uniqueness [...]”

Within the evaluative framework of physical painting conventions, the artistic value of digital painting is not particularly prominent and is not even regarded as a form of

painting. However, this evaluative perspective is untenable within the context of medium specificity, as it assesses digital painting through conventions established for physical mediums. Such an approach is inherently founded upon a cognitive misalignment of identity, rendering any definitive conclusions strictly speaking untenable. As artist observed, “the greatest oil painting in the world will never be the greatest digital image, nor will the greatest digital image ever be a terrific painting.” That is to say, digital painting and physical painting constitute two distinct categories of painting. We cannot apply the conventions of either as an evaluative standard; to do so would be both unreasonable and unfair.

The re-examination of the identity definition of digital painting

This section is divided into three stages. The first two stages will examine how digital mediums have introduced new painting conventions, encompassing specific visual effects and practical processes. Building upon this foundation, the third stage will redefine, or rather, recognise the identity of digital painting.

The repositioning of visual conventions

From the visual aspect, there is a discussion concerning visual effects. As early as the 1990s, scholar Rogers (1995) questioned the validity of treating digital painting as a replication or continuation of traditional painting. Rogers contends that “such an attitude assumes the computer to be little more than a method for replicating other art production activities, such as charcoal drawing or printmaking, without the associated cleanup problems.” Since the turn of the 21st century, as digital painting techniques have gradually gained widespread adoption and matured, certain artists and scholars have recognised that digital painting possesses its own distinct artistic conventions, which require deliberate construction and emphasis. Digital painting pioneer and scholar was the first to point out that using digital mediums to replicate the artistic effects of traditional painting holds no value. Artists must actively explore the uniqueness and potential of digital imaging to develop new painting languages. This strategy has likewise found expression in the work of certain artists. For instance, artist Jan Ternald observed the distortion and low-quality textures inherent in the default textures of three-dimensional software, a specific visual effect of digital imaging (*Figure 6*) and developed it into a distinctive digital painting language (Abouaf, 2000). Digital painter Ursula Freer is keenly interested in layering images (Tavano, 2011). She favours combining graphic software functions such as ‘layers,’ ‘opacity,’ and ‘blending modes’ to explore multi-layered textural effects that are difficult or impossible to achieve with physical materials (*Figure 7*).



Figure 6. Digital Circus Trip, Painting.

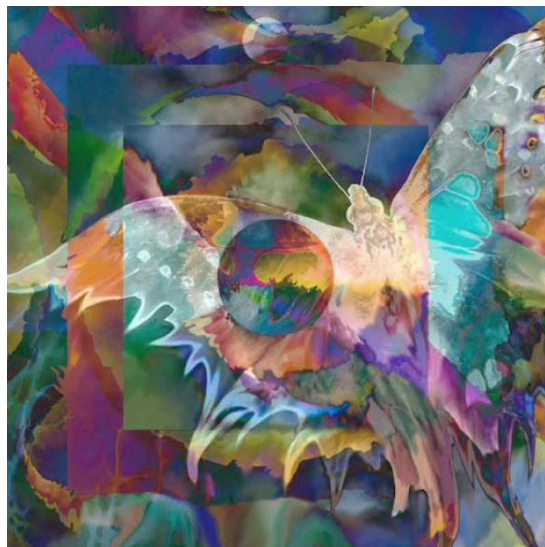


Figure 7. Night Flight.

Scholar and artist Annum (2014) suggests that artists should pay attention to and explore the various graphic editing tools and functions within Photoshop, such as the filters featuring “pointillist effect, spattering effect, mosaic effect, sand collage effect.” These can yield a series of new painting languages (*Figure 8*) possessing distinctive digital features. Artist Yaman Kayihan, in turn, incorporates the dynamic capabilities of video or animation software, placing the visual elements of the composition within a state of continuous flux and cyclical movement (*Figure 9*). This dynamic effect cannot be achieved through physical materials (Alcaraz, 2016). As scholar Gao (2023) states, “digital gestures are incorporated into the new formal aesthetics and techniques of layering, dynamic brushes, colour infusion, etc.; all unachievable in previously traditional forms,” thereby giving rise to a new pictorial language.

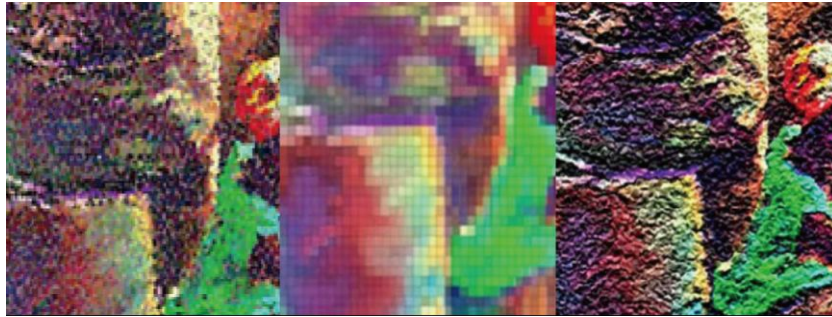


Figure 8. Special Digital Painting Effects.
Source: Annum (2014).

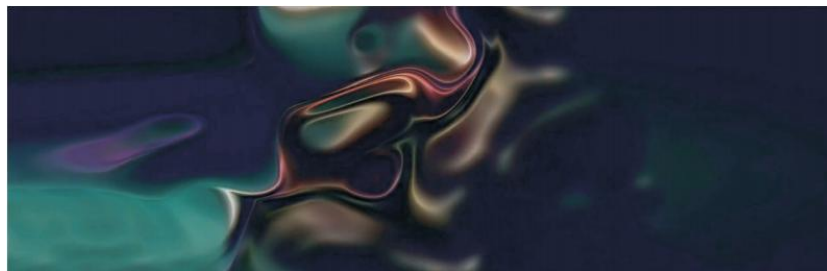


Figure 9. Kinetic Picture 68: Self Formation.

The aforementioned painting languages exhibiting digital imaging features have been described and categorised by scholars (Frew, 2022; Robinson, 2022), though their research has primarily centred on the field of post-digital painting. Very few scholars explicitly point out that these studies suggest digital painting possesses its own distinct visual features, independent of the physical painting conventions. Moreover, the academic community currently tends to regard digital painting as a replication and continuation of physical painting. This has consequently led to a significant dearth of research treating images with pronounced digital imaging features as digital paintings. That is to say, the established conventions of physical painting have consistently functioned as a hegemonic constraint upon the identity construction of digital painting. As the pioneer and scholar of digital painting, Walker (2006), lamented: “It was all too easy to dismiss anything to do with computers as ‘graphics.’ Everyone could suppose that geeks couldn’t draw and had nothing to offer in the way of authentic art.”

The repositioning of practice conventions

From the practice aspect, there is a discussion concerning the practice process. Walker (2006) also noted that the advent of digital mediums has profoundly changed the painting processes. Walker believes that the functions of graphics software (e.g., copy, paste, morph, interpolate, composite) and the interface (windows, layers, links, menus and hot spots) constitute the painter's “second nature.” Walker suggests that artists experiment and observe each software “gadget” as an “outsider” during the practice process, as each software feature may lead to the discovery of a new painting language (Rutherford, 2009). We can observe that the aforementioned scholars or artists likewise endorse such creative strategies. That is to say, in their practice, artists do not employ digital painting brushes designed to replicate physical effects, but rather favour utilising specific software functions to explore the possibilities of digital imaging, thereby developing new visual languages for painting. This point was further

corroborated during the researchers' discussions with 3 artists. The inclusion of this section stems from the scarcity of practical-level materials in existing research, necessitating the researchers to gather additional evidence to substantiate their thesis. The digital paintings by the artists encountered by this research institute all demonstrate their interest in exploring the possibilities of digital imaging and developing new painting languages. It should be noted that this study focuses solely on identifying cognitive misalignments in the perception of digital painting identity. Consequently, it will only briefly outline artists' responses that support the research's perspective, without undertaking detailed case studies. Such in-depth analysis will be the subject of subsequent research endeavours.

Mario Viele (personal communication) is an artist from the United States. His digital paintings continue the style of glitch art, seeking to explore and present a painting language possessing the specific features of digital imaging. Mario's creative process utilised over fifteen different graphics software programmes (he did not specify the names of each programme, primarily sharing his creative process/strategy). The visual elements in Mario's work originate from the digital photographs he captures daily. He then subjects these images to multiple rounds of re-editing, ripping and tearing, rebuilding, and recolouring within various graphic software programmes. He experiments with randomly overlaying filter functions from different applications and blending disparate layers to uncover unexpected visual effects (*Figure 10* and *Figure 11*). His approach bears certain similarities to that of the artist Ursula Freer mentioned above.



Figure 10. Untamed Urgency.



Figure 11. A partial screenshot of Mario Viele's work.

Sébastien Dessauvage (personal communication) is an artist from Belgium whose digital paintings continue the artistic style of Y2K (digital imaging effects from around the year 2000). Sebastien utilises the graphics software Bryce, a programme specialising in the creation and rendering of 3D terrain and natural environment modelling. First released in 1994, its final version was published in 2010, with development ceasing in 2018. Sebastien employs this now-discontinued software precisely because it excels at recreating the distorted, low-quality digital texture of late 1990s or early 2000s digital imaging, constrained by the limitations of the technology at the time (*Figure 12* and *Figure 13*). This constitutes the raw material for Sébastien's development of a painting language possessing distinctive digital imaging features, a creative strategy akin to that of the aforementioned artist Jan Ternald. Sébastien also mentioned his keen interest in exploring every aspect of Bryce's functionality, aiming to uncover visual effects overlooked or marginalised by mainstream visual culture. These include low-quality digital imaging effects such as colour banding, pixelation/graininess, and distortion, which can be effectively harnessed to develop new painting languages.



Figure 12. New Connection.



Figure 13. A partial screenshot of Sebastien Dessauvage's Work.

Diana Ilithya (personal communication) is an artist and visiting lecturer currently residing in Germany, whose interests lie in creating dynamic digital paintings. Diana suggests that the tools for creating digital paintings should not be confined to graphics software alone; consideration should also be given to developing imaging algorithm tools, such as the OpenGL Shading Language she employs. Diana primarily explores dynamic, cyclical painting language through the creation and application of specific imaging algorithms (*Figure 14* and *Figure 15*), such as ‘ $\sin()$ and $\cos()$ and for $()$ loops.’ This bears similarities to the creative strategy employed by the aforementioned artist Yaman Kayihan. Naturally, building upon this dynamic foundation, Diana further incorporates various digital imaging characteristics, such as the aforementioned colour banding or pixel texture/grain, to emphasise the distinctiveness of the digitised painting language, thereby enhancing the stylistic quality of the work.

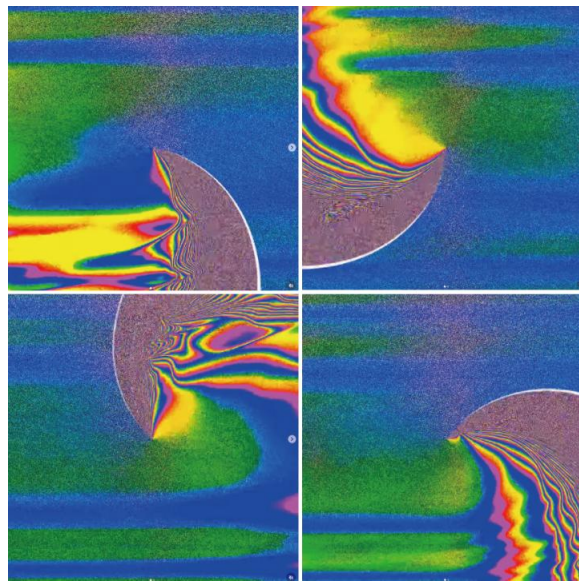


Figure 14. Shader.

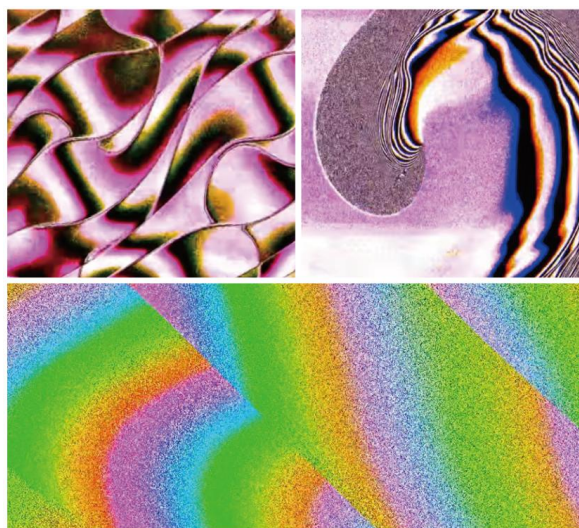


Figure 15. A partial screenshot of Diana Ilithya's Work.

Re-examination of identity definition

From the perspective of medium specificity theory and considering the visual effects and practical processes of relevant artists' works, this study contends that, on a visual level, digital paintings which continue or replicate the visual effects of traditional physical painting cannot be regarded as strictly digital paintings. The core of their artistic practice remains physical painting; they can only be described as employing digital mediums to produce (traditional) physical paintings, wherein the digital medium is not regarded as a distinct creative medium but rather as a tool for simulating the visual effects of other painting categories. Genuine digital painting explores and showcases the unique characteristics and potential of digital imaging technology, seeking to expand the expressive boundaries of the art of painting through such techniques (yielding a visual language of painting unattainable through physical mediums). In practical terms, artists do not favour brushes that simulate physical

painting effects, continuing to employ the strategies of physical painting practice; rather, they tend to utilise specific functions within particular software, or combine multiple software functions in layered configurations, or employ imaging algorithm editing tools to explore the possibilities and unique characteristics of digital imaging, thereby developing new painting languages. Therefore, from a medium-specific perspective, this study posits that the identity of digital painting should be defined as: Digital painting is a category of painting that emerged alongside the digital imaging technology. From a visual aspect, digital painting utilises specific features of digital imaging (such as colour banding, low-resolution textures, or multi-layer blending), emphasising the differences between its own visual language system and other painting categories. From a practical aspect, creators tend to employ specific functions of graphic software or imaging algorithm editing tools to explore the distinctiveness of digital imaging (rather than using brushes that simulate physical painting effects), develop new visual languages for painting, and expand the expressive boundaries of the painting art.

Conclusion

Overall, this study, grounded in the perspective of medium specificity, highlights that the current tendency among many scholars or artists to define digital painting as a continuation or replication of physical painting conventions constitutes a cognitive misalignment in terms of identity. This misalignment prevents the artistic value of digital painting itself from being correctly positioned and discussed. On this basis, the present study cites the perspectives of several scholars and artists, re-identifying the identity of digital painting through its artistic conventions, which is the distinctive visual qualities of digital painting emerge from the specific features of digital imaging, rather than physical painting; the practical process of digital painting uses software's specific functions or image-editing algorithms, rather than digital brushes designed to simulate physical painting effects. This suggests a more effective direction or say perspective for discussing the artistic value of digital painting. Although this perspective has been partially reflected in some studies, the number of relevant investigations remains limited, and no explicit detailed description of this perspective has been provided. This research fills this gap to a certain extent. It must be emphasised that this study constitutes merely a correction to the prevailing understanding of digital painting's identity, offering a more effective perspective for its investigation. Under this perspective, the specific artistic values manifested by digital painting, such as its visual/aesthetic characteristics, artistic practice strategies, or historical significance; require further sequential research to be progressively refined. Certainly, the current definition still presents fundamental issues requiring resolution, such as the specific validation of the legitimacy of images possessing digital imaging features as “paintings”, or of moving video as digital “paintings.” These form the basis for the legitimacy of the digital painting identity recognition perspective proposed by this research institute and are all issues that must be addressed in due course.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that no conflict of interest is associated with any parties involved in this research.

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