

THE TEMPORALITY OF PAINTING IN DIGITAL MOVING PAINTING

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Abstract. How painting suggests the presence of time is one of the key issues that both artists and theorists have focused upon. Unlike the diachronic conception of time, which unfolds sequentially through past, present, and future, the conception of time in painting exhibits a synchronic quality. Namely, past, present, and future are integrated into an original synthesis, mutually overlapping and permeating one another. This is the core distinction between painting in its representation of the concept of time and photography or film. Generally speaking, the visual expression of painting is static. Through the repeated layering of pigments, materials, brushstrokes, or the composition of positive and negative space, the artist evokes the concept of time through features of synchronicity. This study attempts to identify a category of digital moving images wherein visual elements on the screen exist in a cyclical state of overlapping and permeating one another. The evolution of these visual elements defies clear distinction regarding their sequence of appearance, thereby dissolving the boundaries between past, present, and future. Such works enable the temporal dimension of painting to be dynamically depicted, thereby suggesting that painting history may need to consider incorporating a new paradigm of painting expression.

Keywords: *painting, temporality, digital, moving, painting*

Introduction

Attempts to represent the concept of time in painting can be traced back to the civilisations of ancient Egypt and ancient Greece. The tomb murals of ancient Egypt employed the "law of frontality", wherein scenes and figures were depicted from a frontal, horizontal perspective. This deliberate avoidance of any spatial movement characteristics implied a sense of timelessness. Ancient Greek bottle painting employed the interplay of positive and negative forms to express the "equilibrium of motion and stillness". Through highly symbolic present moments, it simultaneously evoked the coexistence of past and future—a synchronous conception of time. Paintings from the Roman Empire and the Renaissance period began to shift towards realistic depictions of scenes or figures from specific time periods. This was influenced by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle's conception of time, which is diachronic, with the past, present, and future denoting distinct temporal categories. This includes the Impressionist movement that emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century, which captured fleeting sensations or the play of light and colour, or instead focused on depicting the present moment—a conception of time that is equally diachronic. Modern painters of the early twentieth century, such as Paul Cézanne, Alberto Giacometti and Giorgio Morandi, sought to re-examine the synchronous conception of time characteristic of ancient Greece through distinct approaches: repeatedly repainting the same subject matter; erasing and reapplying paint and traces; and employing the strategy of positive and negative space inversion (the developmental trajectory of time concepts in painting,

compiled from art theorist Lan Youli's doctoral thesis *Temporality of Painting*; for further details, see Lan, 2013).

Painters from different periods have adopted varied approaches to depicting or suggesting the presence of time in a painting. However, for theorists engaged in ontological reflections on painting (those who have contemplated the very essence of painting), painting is often regarded as a specific art form that expresses a synchronic conception of time. For instance, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1993), Mikel Dufrenne (1973), and John Berger (2018) have each suggested that painting does not embody a time perspective akin to cinema's frame-by-frame progression or photography's fixation on a single instant. The concept of time expressed in painting connects the past and future through the present or places the ephemeral and timeless in a state of mutual mapping. However, owing to the inherently static nature of painting as a medium, most artists primarily achieve this through the layering of pigments and brushstrokes, or by juxtaposing positive and negative spaces within a formal structure (Lan, 2013). However, this study observes a category of digital moving images that points towards a dynamic form of the concept of time within painting. Although such digital moving images, it lacks the scene transitions characteristic of film, that is, a linear progression of time. The visual elements within such imagery exist in a dynamic cycle of mutual overlapping and permeation, in which the so-called past, present, and future cannot be distinctly separated. They suggest a new dynamic paradigm for painting.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research strategy, aiming to provide descriptive or interpretative perspectives on specific phenomena rather than quantitative or generalised statistics (Grossoehme, 2014). The conceptual paper framework guides the discourse and writing approach of this study. Additionally, observational methods and visual analysis are incorporated as supplementary methods to support the discourse text. The text analysed and discussed in this conceptual paper does not derive from empirical methods such as interviews, fieldwork or experiments, but is based on existing literature which "integrating and proposing new relationships among constructs," and "the onus is on developing logical and complete arguments for associations rather than testing them empirically (Gilson and Goldberg, 2015)." However, unlike review articles, conceptual papers tend to "seek to bridge existing theories [...] provide multi-level insights [...] offer propositions regarding previously untested relationships (Gilson and Goldberg, 2015)." Rather than focusing on reviewing and criticizing the findings within a specific research domain.

The perspectives derived from this study, as presented in the conceptual paper's line of argument, require further elaboration through relevant works. The viewpoints derived from this study, as presented in the conceptual paper's line of argument, require further elaboration through relevant works; indeed, it is precisely such work that inspired the researchers to conduct this research. Researchers observed a category of moving images within Instagram's digital visual community, prompting associations with the temporal concepts/theories of painting. This led to reflections on the potential for dynamic expressions of the concept of painting time. Therefore, researchers need to continue observing, collecting, classifying, and documenting works suitable for discussion within online communities (Baker, 2006). During the writing process, one must provide textual descriptions of the relevant work's visual features. This involves visual analysis

methods, namely the description of visual features such as line, colour, shape, texture, balance, repetition, and space within the works (Ragans, 1988). Observation and visual analysis serve as supplementary methods to provide the material needed to express viewpoints.

Results and Discussion

Time and temporality

Before elaborating on the time in painting, we must first distinguish between the time and temporality. This will help to define the scope of this study's discussion clearly. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, "time" refers to "the part of existence that is measured in minutes, days, years, etc., or this process considered as a whole (Cambridge Dictionary, 2026)." The quantification of time is fundamentally linked to Aristotle's endowment of time with order and direction (Lan, 2013), which "the before and after' exists in time because it also exists in change, and it exists in change because it also exists in magnitude, and, further, that 'time follows change' and 'change follows magnitude' (Bowin, 2009)." This also results in the past, present and future being segmented into three distinct temporal categories.

Temporality is a philosophical concept concerning time, that is, the description and interpretation of time rather than its measurement. Philosophers hold differing views on temporality. The philosopher Immanuel Kant maintained that time constitutes a transcendental form of sensibility, one of the most fundamental conditions for human perception of the world, in which "time is nothing other than the subjective condition under which all intuitions can take place in us." In Kant's view, time is a subjective perception lacking any genuine beginning or end (Herbert, 2016; Kant, 1998). For philosopher Paul Sartre, "past, present, and future should not be considered as a collection of 'givens,' but rather as 'the structured moments of an original synthesis.'" Since the present cannot be grasped, the past has already passed, and the future has yet to arrive, these three are essentially experienced in a state of unity (Herbert, 2016; Schroeder, 2005). The philosopher Martin Heidegger similarly contends that time cannot truly be partitioned into past, present, and future; what we perceive or comprehend are the "ecstases" of these three. That is, a particular experience emerging from the convergence of all three (Hughes, 2020; Heidegger, 2010). Naturally, temporality does not solely refer to the aforementioned concept of unity. Philosophers with backgrounds in natural science research, such as Aristotle or Charles Darwin, tended to view the progression of time as possessing a clear direction and sequence, with past, present, and future unfolding in an irreversible, sequential manner (Berger, 2018; Roark, 2011).

In general, time refers to a unit of measurement, while temporality denotes the philosophical interpretation of time. Within this study, temporality is primarily addressed through two interpretative directions. The first direction, a relatively common and empiricist-leaning interpretation, posits that time unfolds sequentially through past, present, and future, exhibiting diachronic features. The second direction leans towards an interpretation grounded in the phenomenological framework (Heidegger and Sartre are both representative figures of phenomenology). Namely, the past, present, and future do not necessarily possess causal, directional, or sequential relationships; the three are integrated into a unified whole. This constitutes a concept of time featured by synchronicity.

The temporality of painting

The preceding sections have distinguished between the concepts of time and temporality. It is now clear that this study focuses on the temporality of painting. Temporality points to concepts of time possessing both diachronic and synchronic features, both of which find expression in painting. Regarding how painting expresses temporality, this study primarily addresses modern painting from the first half and middle of the 20th century. Compared to ancient Greece, ancient Egypt, or the Renaissance, modern painting engaged in a more vigorous exploration of temporality. It may be said that behind every formal revolution in modern painting lies a corresponding reinterpretation of temporality: from a diachronic conception of time as linear progression, to a synchronic conception of time as cyclical or parallel (Mercioiu-Popa, 2024; Lan, 2013). Through reflection upon and comprehension of temporality, they expanded the expressive boundaries of the painting medium. Works exhibiting temporal features in painting, which manifest a sense of duration, can be traced to Cubism, Futurism, and Abstract Expressionism. According to painting theorist Lan Youli (2013, p. 97), modern art generally conceives of time as movement within space; that is, time is segmented into past, present, and future for arrangement or collage. Thus, we may observe works by Cubist masters such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque that combine visual elements from multiple spatial dimensions (*Figure 1*). Although their works juxtapose past, present, and future with a tendency towards synchronicity (Mercioiu-Popa, 2024), these three elements do not overlap or permeate one another, remaining distinct entities. Consequently, they still constitute an expression of diachrony (Lan, 2013).



Figure 1. Examples of painting works by Left: Pablo Picasso in 1937 and Right: Georges Braque in 1911.

The Futurist movement more directly expressed the sequential, diachronic development of time. For instance, Marcel Duchamp (who combined Cubism and Futurism) and Giacomo Balla depicted the spatial trajectories of moving subjects at different moments in time by partially overlapping them on the canvas. This technique suggests the presence of time through the representation of movement within space (Le Poidevin, 2017; Merjian, 2012) (*Figure 2*). Jackson Pollock, a leading figure in Abstract Expressionist painting, regarded painting as the trajectory of the body's movement through time. The outcome of painting constitutes the imprint left by movement during a specific period or instant conception of temporality akin to photography (Mercioiu-Popa, 2024; Berger, 2018) (*Figure 3*). Paintings exhibiting synchronic temporal features

can be found in the works of Paul Cézanne, Alberto Giacometti, and Giorgio Morandi (Figure 3). Cézanne rejected the Impressionist idea of capturing a moment in time. He employed painting strategies such as "subtle grasping of points in motion," "repeated depiction of the same subject," and "positive and negative spaces serving as mutual backgrounds" to express a unified conception of time encompassing past, present, and future (Lan, 2013). For instance, "the pots in Cézanne's paintings always appear poised to tip over," and this grasp of the point in motion suggests an overlay of past and future (Lan, 2013). Giacometti, through his layered technique of erasing, redrawing, concealing, and revealing visual elements, rendered his works into accumulations of time (Lan, 2013). Namely, Giacometti repeatedly depicted a single subject, deliberately leaving visible the traces of preparatory sketches, alterations, and unfinished work to suggest the overlapping states of past, present, and future (Lan, 2013). Morandi employed a form of positive-negative displacement, suggesting that "within the temporal sequencing of positive and negative poles, the connection and cyclical nature of time is also implied, thereby forming a sealed hourglass system," thus hinting at the wholeness of time (Lan, 2013).



Figure 2. Examples of painting works by Left: Giacomo Balla in 1912 and Right: Jackson Pollock in 1950.

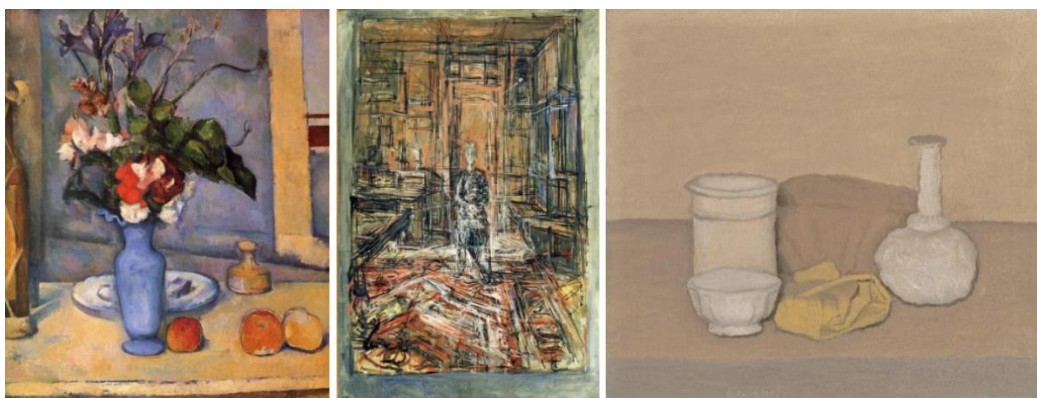


Figure 3. Examples of painting works by Left: Paul Cézanne in 1887, Centre: Alberto Giacometti in 1950, and Right: Giorgio Morandi in 1952.

The synchronic essence of temporality in painting

Paintings manifest temporal characteristics that are either diachronic or synchronic. However, most theorists engaged in ontological reflections on painting tend to interpret

painting's temporality as synchronic. This highlights painting's particular mode of temporal expression as a distinct art form, differing from photography or film. Merleau-Ponty (1993) uses Théodore Géricault's painting *The Derby at Epsom* to illustrate the temporal difference between painting and photography. Merleau-Ponty pointed out that the posture of the horse depicted by Géricault, leaping in mid-air whilst galloping, does not exist. Géricault's depiction of the horse is not a photographic representation but rather the artist's expression on canvas of his perception of the horse's continuous motion in flight. The scene suggests that the horse is "leaving here, going there", meaning the artist attempts to evoke the presence of both past and future through the present moment (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 145). For Merleau-Ponty, capturing a horse through photography would result in a frozen, static moment, whereas Géricault's paintings suggest the fluidity of time. He went on to quote sculptor Auguste Rodin, saying, "It is the artist who is truthful, while the photograph lies; for, in reality, time never stops (Merleau-Ponty, 1993)."

Mikel Dufrenne (1973) observes in his discussion of "the temporalisation of space" in painting that what painting presents is not a representation of movement, but rather the becoming movement-towards. Dufrenne (1973) said, "The movement of the represented object is arrested. It goes from motion to immobility." This kind of movement is what film excels at. Moreover, "the movement of the pictorial object, in contrast, is a congealed movement which tends to unfold. It goes from immobility to motion." Dufrenne (1973) argues that this instant of transition from stillness to motion "is the end of a movement and retains a certain vibrancy." Much like a dancer's momentary, exquisite pose, it unfolds the preceding movement while simultaneously foreshadowing the next (Dufrenne, 1973). For Dufrenne, the temporality of painting likewise constitutes a synthesis of past, present, and future. John Berger (2018) pointed out that "Without an acknowledged coexistence of the ephemeral and the timeless, there is nothing of consequence for pictorial art to do." Berger (2018) contends that the very static state of painting itself suggests a language of timelessness. However, unlike geometry which likewise evokes timelessness, painting depicts objects that are "the sensuous, the particular and the ephemeral." For Berger (2018), the unique aspect of his painting's presentation of temporality lies in its practical reconciliation of the ephemeral and the timeless, which "its mediation between the realm of the timeless and the visible and tangible was more total and poignant than that of any other art." Although Berger does not explicitly state the synchronic features of temporality in painting, it is evident that he rejects the notion that painting's representation of temporality can be understood diachronically. The mutual entanglement and mapping of ephemeral and timeless elements inherently constitute a temporal quality possessing synchronic features, for they cannot be separated.

Contemporary painting theorist Lan Youli (2013) explicitly points out that Cubism employs spatial deconstruction and reconstruction to synthesise multiple perspectives of an object simultaneously within a single composition, while Futurism, through depicting the continuous trajectories of moving objects, remains confined to mechanically recording and simulating the operational rules of temporal measurement. This overlooks the more fundamental temporality inherent in the pictorial arts, namely that the essence of time revealed in ancient Greek art lies in the grasping of the opportune moment—a temporality that connects past and future through the present, achieving a state of complete solidification and perfect emergence. This differs from the experience and expression of time in photography, film, and music.

The dynamic form of the temporal synchronicity feature in painting

The preceding section elucidated the synchronic features of temporal expression in painting, yet current visual analyses and discussions predominantly centre on physical painting. This study examines a category of digital moving images in which the visual elements within the work overlap and permeate one another during continuous playback. This suggests a dynamic form of painting that captures its synchronic temporal nature, thereby hinting at new dynamic forms of painting. The earliest dynamic images that can be regarded as dynamic painting can be traced back to the work *Density 10:2:2:1* created by German artist Karl Otto Götz between 1962 and 1963. Götz endeavoured to treat the television set as a medium for painting and sought to propose a new paradigm for painting: kinetic electronic painting. However, at the time, Götz lacked the means to use a television set for his creative work. Instead, he resorted to using film's playback mode to imitate and reproduce television's unique imaging mechanism (Guillermet, 2019; Mehring, 2008). Traditional cinema achieves its motion through the sequential projection of film frames, representing a quintessential art form that generates dynamic imagery through diachronic progression. Meanwhile, television achieves motion through the coupling of continuous image "flashing" with the human eye's "after-image effect" (Guillermet, 2019). This imaging mechanism affords an experience closer to simultaneity, in which images of the past linger before one's eyes while the present image generates images of the future. Götz keenly captured this and rendered it as a dynamic painting.

In the *Density 10:2:2:1* display, black-and-white squares within the grid form distinct shapes through varying densities, sequences, and orientations. With each screen flicker, the positions of black and white squares within each image did not undergo complete alteration but rather partial substitution (*Figure 4*). This effect of mutual permeation between images, "as pure spontaneous movement of light particles on the surface of the canvas (Guillermet, 2019)." This imaging mechanism explicitly reveals a temporal superposition of the past (afterimage), present (current image), and future (emerging image)-that is, the unique synchronic temporality of painting as described by Merleau-Ponty (1993) or Mikel Dufrenne (1973). Moreover, "the opening sequence shows what appears to be a static Raster Picture, maintaining the ambivalence between canvas and screen (Guillermet, 2019)." This points to the grid's "law of frontality" and the static attributes of the canvas metaphor, both of which point towards timelessness, alongside the ephemeral presented by the image's flashing. Together, they constitute what John Berger (2018) describes as painting's unique, synchronic structure possessing both ephemerality and timelessness.



Figure 4. *Density 10:2:2:1.*
Source: Karl Otto Götz in between 1962-1963.

Götz's kinetic electronic painting presents for the first time the temporal feature of simultaneity inherent in painting through dynamism. Although earlier works such as *Rhythmus 21* (1921) by painter and avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter, and *An Optical Poem* (1938) by painter and abstract animator Oskar Fischinger, also hinted at similar dynamic forms of abstract painting, Götz considered them entirely unrelated to his own practice. These works remained presentations of dynamic forms based on the diachronic of film (Guillermet, 2019). Today, we can still observe that the visual paradigm of Götz's kinetic electronic painting continues to be widely maintained in numerous contemporary digital dynamic imageries. Researchers will subsequently continue their discussion by examining the works of three contemporary artists. In digital artist Diana Ilithya's work *Rain* (2025), one observes her abstraction of raindrops as slender vertical rectangles, within which various colours continuously cycle and transform into one another (*Figure 5*). These visual elements do not possess any so-called sequential order of appearance; past, present and future are dissolved. This points to the temporal quality, characterised by synchronicity, that is peculiar to painting, as described by Merleau-Ponty or Dufrenne. Moreover, the visuals adhere to the law of frontality, thus eschewing cinematic scene transitions; dynamic elements are instead cycled continuously within a fixed perspective. This continues to suggest the synchronic structure Berger describes as possessing both ephemeral and timeless. Such expressive can also be observed in Diana's other works.

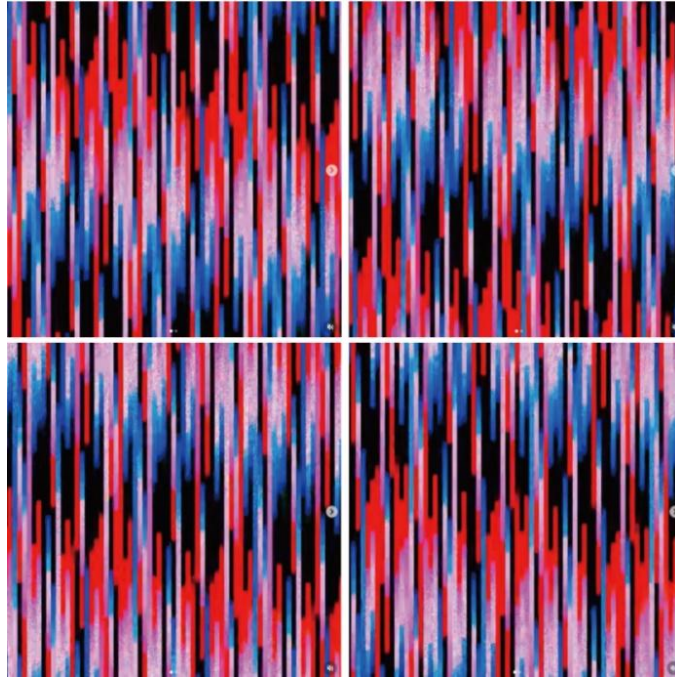


Figure 5. *Rain (Screenshot).*
Source: Diana Ilithya in 2025.

In digital artist Guandanarian's work *Fractal Research part 2* (2025), the edges of irregular shapes undergo continuous cyclical expansion and reduction based on similar formative tendencies, while the pixels and graphic symbols within the shapes remain in a perpetual state of overlapping and permeating one another (*Figure 6*). In this dynamic imagery, there is likewise no temporal relationship between past, present, and future. Guandanarian also employs the law of frontality, where the fixed perspective and scene suggest timelessness, while the internally circulating symbols and pixel blocks evoke ephemerality. This expressive can also be observed in other works by Guandanarian. Artist Kit Valo's work *CH20* (2025) presents an object approximating a mass, whose external and internal three-dimensional geometric structures exist in a perpetual state of cyclical interchange and permeation. We cannot discern whether this object is collapsing inwards or expanding outwards (*Figure 7*). Thus, the spatial motion of this object possesses neither a so-called beginning nor an end; all spatial motion and its corresponding time are chaotic, further underscoring the synchronic features of temporality. The application of the same law of frontality continues to suggest a synchronic structure where the ephemeral and timeless coexist. This expressive can also be observed in other works.

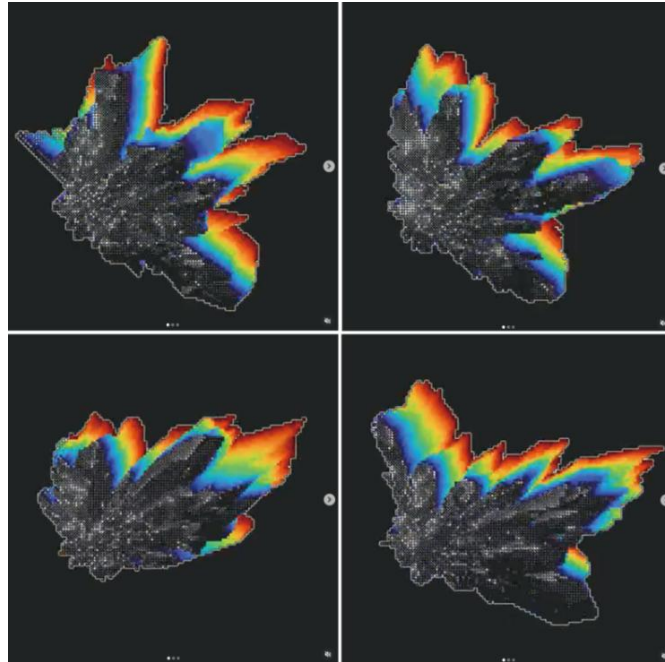


Figure 6. *Fractal Research part 2, 2025 (Screenshot).*
Source: Guandanarian in 2025.

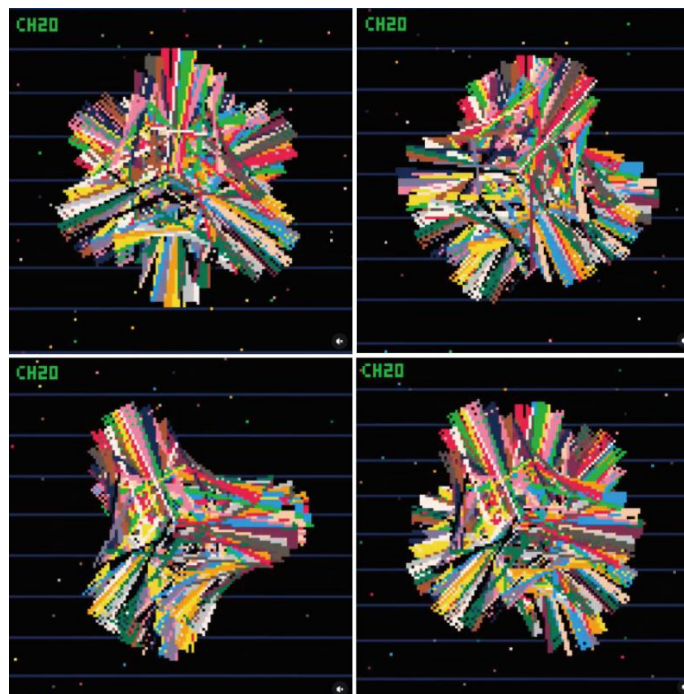


Figure 7. *CH20 (Screenshot).*
Source: Kit Valo in 2025.

In summary, this study finds that the aforementioned category of digital moving images continues to demonstrate the temporal dynamism inherent in painting's synchronic features. They continue the temporal features of painting, thereby pointing towards a dynamic form of digital painting, which also represents the continuation of the visual paradigm of kinetic electronic painting in the digital age. However, digital moving painting, is by no means a fresh concept. Cultural theorist Aleksandra Alcaraz

(2016) and artist Michael Evans (2020) have both noted that the fusion of painting and animation can realise a form of digital moving painting. Numerous scholars have also highlighted the capacity of digital painting to achieve dynamic visual effects (Matrahah et al., 2025; Wang, 2025; Gao, 2023). However, these studies do not explicitly clarify the distinction between painting and the dynamic forms of film or video—that is, why is certain digital moving images termed painting? Or whether these works can be regarded as painting? This study, in examining how the synchronic temporal features of painting are rendered dynamically, also elucidates the differences in dynamic form between painting and film or video. It thereby provides a concrete analytical perspective for identifying digital moving painting, within dynamic imagery.

Conclusion

Overall, this study, grounded in the concept of temporality and the perspectives of relevant theorists, examines the temporal dimension inherent in painting that possesses synchronic features, namely, the synthesis of past, present, and future. On this basis, the study identifies that specific contemporary digital moving images provide a dynamic expressive paradigm for the synchronic representation of painting. The visual elements within this paradigm exist in a cyclical state of overlapping and permeation, in which the dynamic transformations of these elements preclude any clear distinction in their sequence of appearance. This dissolves the boundaries between past, present, and future. Such digital moving images suggest that the field of painting studies may need to consider incorporating a new category of painting: digital moving painting. It suggests that artistic representations of time need not follow a linear progression in a single direction, as in film or music, but can equally be chaotic and non-linear.

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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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