

2nd Symposium on Digital Art in Ireland - UCC

'The Lady of the Lake is Hiding in the Expanded Field'

Sarah Iremonger June 2024



Images from the 1981 film *Excalibur* by John Boorman
filmed at Powerscourt Waterfall



Foreword

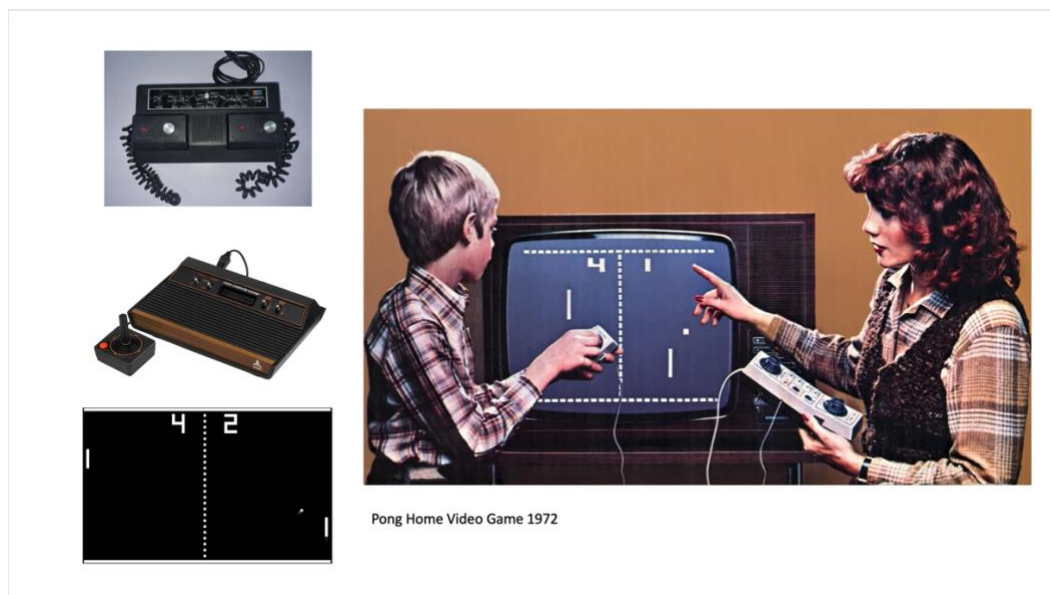
I do not see myself as a digital artist in the sense that my work neither originates from nor inhabits the digital sphere. I use digital technologies throughout my process to create analogue works and the digital informs how these works evolve, more on this later. Writing this paper has allowed me to mull over ideas of situationlessness, the self and representation. These ideas become theories like shifting sands, and like a scientist who makes discoveries I have to constantly realign my entire way of thinking, seeing and describing based on those discoveries.

Abstract

Is it possible to be an artist in a world where everything is watching you as much as, or even more so than you are watching it? The 1981 film *Excalibur* by John Boorman, filmed at Powerscourt Waterfall in Co. Wicklow, provides a wonderful analogy of what it's like to be an artist navigating digital technologies in the 21st century. A loss of situatedness¹ leads me to wonder if I am the sword 'Excalibur' embedded in the stone waiting to be released, to be plucked from the dilemma of the past so that a heroic potential can be realised and put to use, only to be broken, thrown into the depths of the lake (or in this case the pool at the

bottom of Powerscourt Waterfall) and lost, once more to be rescued and held on high by the Lady of the Lake?

Art is key to unlocking realities through the imagination images creating an apophenia making sense out of visual noise. Painting has been a means of falling into our imaginations since the Stone Age reminding us that experiencing is a creative act of imagination². In this paper, I discuss ideas of representation and transformation in developing artwork through practical and thinking processes, as part of my *Horizons* project. Taking George Barret's 18th-century paintings of the *View of Powerscourt Waterfall* (he painted several versions – there is one in the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin and another is in the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool) as source material to create drawings and paintings and to develop digital 3-dimensional landscapes exploring a sense of dislocation and disorientation, a situationlessness¹ created by a data-driven digital era.



Early context

My father loved technology and we had an Atari computer in the 1970s. He always wanted the latest technological development, and when the computer game 'Pong' came out in 1972 my mother had to persuade him to wait a year after it was released before buying it so that it would not be so expensive. I remember playing Pong and loving that you could move the little white bar up and down the black TV screen and cause the moving dot (the ball) to change its course like a game of table tennis. Up until then, the TV screen had been a *fait accompli*, a passive watching experience of *Jackanory*, *Blue Peter* and *Wanderly Wagon*; after Pong this was changed forever.

I got my first computer 20 years later in the 1990s and never lost the feeling of excitement that you could move things around on a virtual desktop with a mouse creating virtual and create documents and images. It was like a new world, an alternate reality, instantly available and manipulatable.



Paolo Uccello, *The Hunt in the Forest*, c. 1465-1470, tempera and oil with traces of gold on panel, 177cm x 73.3cm, the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford [overlaid perspective grid drawn by Sarah Gillett]

The Horizon

The horizon was invented as a “virtual horizon” in the 1460s¹ with the declaration of a stable and fixed ground in reality. The “virtual horizon” started to appear as a single point of perspective fixed in time and space in the paintings of Paolo Uccello during this time as in *The Hunt in the Forest* (c. 1465-1470). Here, it is shown with an overlaid perspective grid by UK artist Sarah Gillett. This virtual horizon was a flattened, mathematical, homogenous, infinite fiction, with a one-eyed central viewpoint that enabled a doctrine of mastery, control and subjecthood, which led to a culture of domination that initiated the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain and the exploration of the West Indies by Christopher Columbus, both in 1492¹. The horizon defined the visible and navigable world privileging the viewer as the dominant force, enabling Western colonial expansion for capitalist gain, the slave trade, and the settlement of Europeans all over the world.

The erection of the Eiffel Tower in 1889³ as a viewing platform from which to see the city of Paris laid out like a map on all sides created access to a new perspective of the world. This new perspective was as important a pivot point for human consciousness as NASA's ‘Earthrise’ image of a prone planet Earth seen from the Moon for the first time, floating jewel-like in an inky nothingness, taken by William Anders (who died recently) on the Apollo 8 mission in 1968.



Earthrise by William Anders, NASA, 1968

Colonial expansion continues into space as the private corporate Cosmic Pussy Paw reaches out, grabbing for a piece of the space pie in the form of Space X's Falcon 9 mission in March of this year.

Our consciousness continues to evolve with technology and the militarisation of the digital sphere, through biometrics, tracking and attention surveillance⁴ technologies, data-mining, spy satellites and drones, hacking terrorism and Generative AI used for targeting and elimination, continuing the project of domination⁵, destruction and control. The consequences and horror of a neo-liberal militarised reality are playing out in Ukraine and Gaza as we speak, where every type of personal horizon is obliterated through the weaponisation of civilians⁶.

Spinning and lost, the horizon is dead, or at least deadly, particularly for the 4,000 sub-postmasters in the UK Post Office, 900 of whom were accused and criminalised falsely of embezzlement by their 'Horizon' accounting software⁷, the infallibility of which was prioritised over human reality. The horizon is also expensive, a home being out of reach for many never mind a view. Ireland has also become an unwilling horizon for many as empty buildings are burned in an attempt to keep immigrants and refugees away.



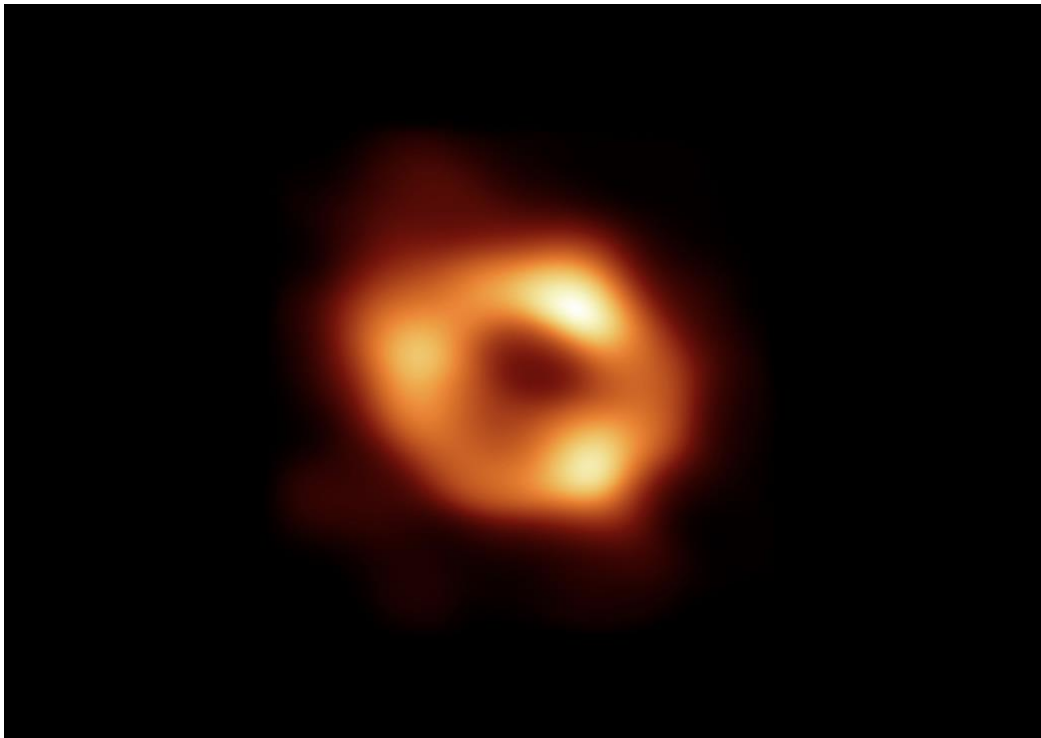
Cosmic Pussy Paw reaches out: grabbing for a piece of the space pie, Space X's Falcon 9 mission in March of this year (screen grab from RTE, 2024)

Philosophy and Politics

The confusion between ourselves and our surroundings is beautifully described by Hito Steyerl in her paper “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective” published by e-flux in 2011¹. She discusses the implications of the loss of the horizon and the disorientation this creates leading to “a prevailing condition of groundlessness” the consequence of which must be a state of free fall for subjects and objects alike. Being in a state of free fall, she explains, is very hard to notice because everything around you is falling at the same rate as you are and this can lead to a feeling of weightlessness and stillness, boundaries become blurred as time and space collapse. Pilots have reported that free fall can trigger a feeling of confusion between the self and the aircraft. While falling, people may sense themselves as being things, while things may sense that they are people. Our relationship with seeing and experiencing is disrupted, creating a sense of groundlessness¹. This disorientation can make us susceptible to disinformation and misinformation leading to a hollowing out of reality.

As I sit in my garden, I feel my plants are watching me and waiting for my next move. As chemically resistant seasonally confused vine weevils munch away on roots and leaves leaving their patterns on the hidden and visible worlds, I wonder if their acts of random creation are not as justified as mine. Information harvested by social media, Amazon and Google, gives me the feeling I am being watched all the time - algorithms know my next move before I do. This feeling of being constantly visible in an information overloaded nowhere that cannot truly know me leaves me in a constant state of wondering who or what I

am. Am I the plant in my back garden being eaten by the vine weevils? The vine weevils themselves? The pot? Excalibur? The Lady in the Lake?



Katie Bouman created this first image of a black hole at the centre of the Milky Way in 2019

Katie Bouman created this first image of a black hole at the centre of the Milky Way in 2019 when she rendered images captured by the Event Horizon Telescope (EHT), a network of eight linked radio telescopes across the planet. It shows a halo of dust and gas measuring 40 billion km across and is 500 million trillion km from Earth⁸. The image was rendered by recovering underlying images from corrupted measurements and image noise from photographs of outer space. The possibility of discovering new and unimaginable entities through image generation models (IGM), artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) is a new zone of discovery beyond representation.

Technology is also revolutionising how digital cameras function and what is understood by a photographic image⁹. Photographic images in the traditional representational paradigm are based on the idea of capturing something that is out there in the real world. This post-representational paradigm creates images based not on what is visible in the world, but on what the camera thinks the image should look like based on the data the camera has access to, stored photos in the camera, social media accounts, etc. The camera becomes the photographer creating images based on a gamble related to our previous choices.

Representation here is exposed as a kind of dark matter, an invisible sea of data heralding the death of the image and the visible world.



Sarah Iremonger, (left) *bearable rules for making a painting* (green), oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm, 1998 (right) *the original* acrylic on canvas, 1m x 1m, 1999

Art Work

I am a conflicted painter, disenchanted by the corporatisation of the art world, the power of property and value, the weight of history, context, politics, and ideas of authorship and aesthetics. My early work sought to dematerialise painting, turning it into a vision of colour as light. This became a meditation on surface. What you see here in this painting *bearable rules for making a painting* from 1998 is the reflection of the viewer on the surface of the painting. I was haunted by the history and context of painting, which I felt every time I put brush to canvas.

the original was painted in 1999 and is about representation and the commodification of art. It is a painting of 12 postcards I collected when visiting museums. I was interested in how commodification and reproduction had a levelling effect on artworks and the idea of representation in the sense of something standing in for the original.

I then moved on to thoughts about the dematerialisation of the 'art object' through the exhibitions *Lumpy Art History* in 2001 and *The Top Half of the Hero* in 2002 culminating in *The Hunting Box Party* in 2005, pictured here, where the artwork has become paraphernalia for a fictitious political party of hunting boxes.



Sarah Iremonger, (left) *The Hunting Box Party*, display case, photographs printed as cards and badges, envelopes, plastic bags, card and badge labels, case 82 x 208 x 102 cm, 2005 (right) *Lost Horizon* after 'Moon Light Scene' 'In the Dargle Country' 'On Coming Storm' and 'Figure in a Landscape with Waterfall' by J. A. O'Connor 1832, watercolour on paper, 47 x 68 cm, 2019

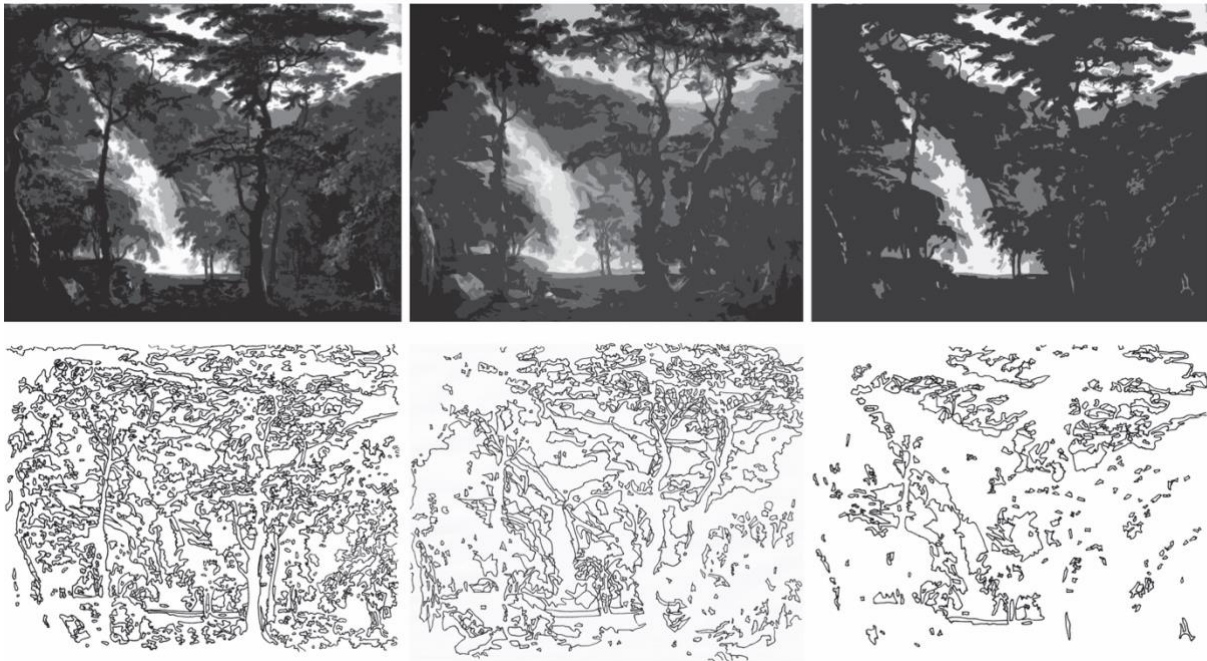
Lost Horizon (above right) watercolour on paper, painted in 2019, is after four paintings by nineteenth-century artist J. A. O'Connor 'Moon Light Scene'; 'In the Dargle Country'; 'On Coming Storm'; and 'Figure in a Landscape with Waterfall'. Each painting has been reduced to a line drawing and these have been superimposed on top of each other. Painting for me involves an act of the loss of self, situatedness demands a perspective, a ground upon which to stand, and being in free fall creates a positive non-self or loss of self. When I am painting I am constantly swerving between a historicised sense of myself, my memories, the desire to outrun myself and the desire to dissolve into the moment, a boundless motion of past, present and future.

The *Horizons* project was initiated in 2014 when my late partner the poet Derek Mahon asked me why I never painted horizontal lines in my early paintings of the 1990s. He would write and I would paint, and we read and discussed ideas together. I knew I couldn't turn back time and start painting in the same style I had then. I wanted to bring the knowledge I had gained through my multimedia and installation works to this new body of work.

Responding to the death of the image, the post-representational turn and the loss of the visible world, I am full of contradictions. Since returning to painting in 2014, I use images from art historical sources, and through digital processes render them unrecognisable - the paintings have become material objects created as points of light which obliquely reference the originals.



George Barret's 2 x *View of Powerscourt Waterfall* oil on canvas, 102 x 128 cm, c1760
Walker Art Gallery version (left) and The National Gallery of Ireland version (right)

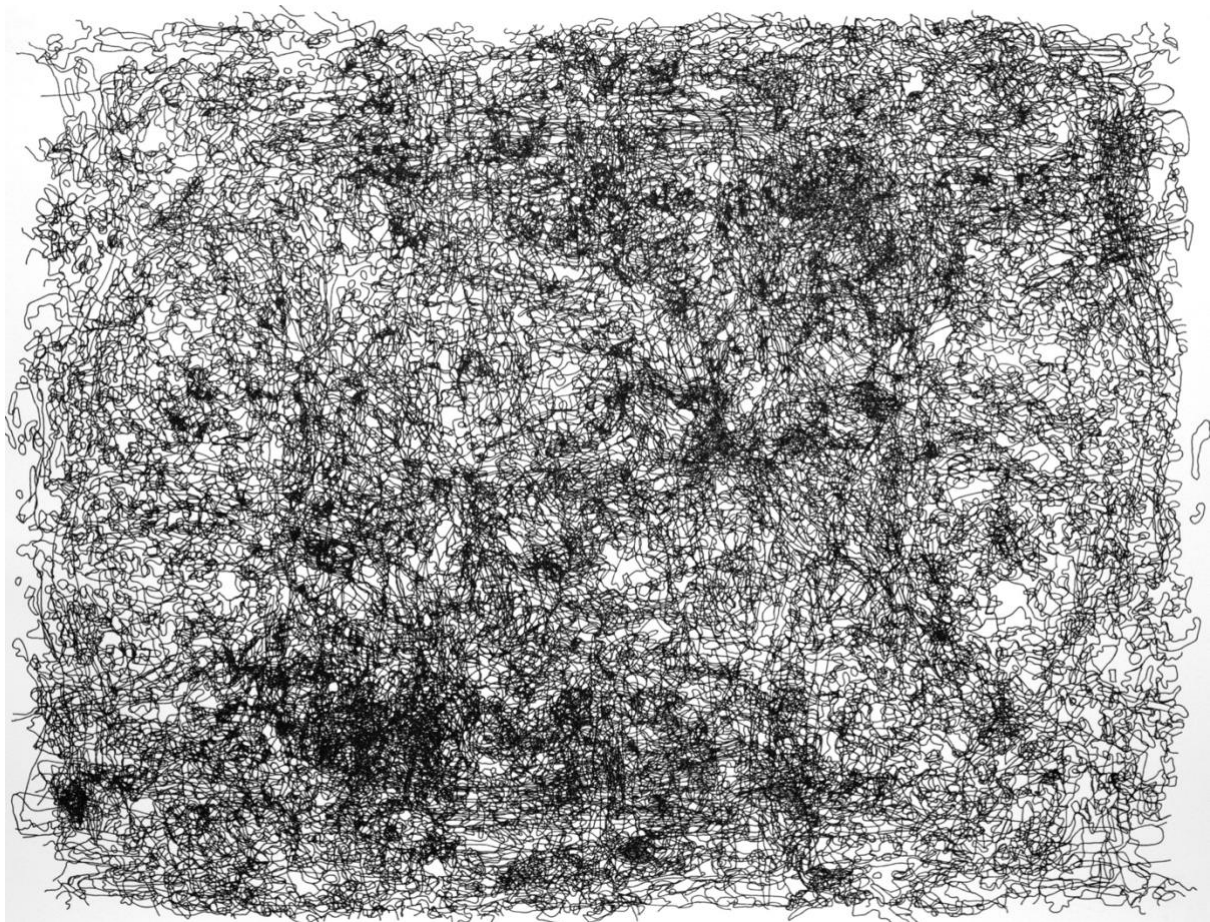


Sarah Iremonger, drawings and cut-out versions of George Barret's painting *View of Powerscourt Waterfall*, (top three) posterised versions (bottom three) ink pen on paper, A4, 2022

I like to imagine waterfalls as time machines: if the flow were reversed you could reverse time. George Barret's paintings *View of Powerscourt Waterfall* offer a unique opportunity for interrogation. He painted several versions of the same view, so the idea of representation is already complicated. He was a follower of Edmund Burke and a romantic, painting arcadian landscapes for the pleased classes, starting with observations of nature. The paintings hark back to a lush pre-industrial verdant landscape which is designed to overpower us; they revel in the sublime, an uncontrollable awe-inspiring force of nature that today we can only dream about in our bio-challenged habitat-denuded climate-changing reality. With their achingly beautiful contrasts and tones, these paintings speak of a nostalgia for an imagined

landscape that never existed. Like a time-machine sending us back to an alternate reality which I sometimes glimpse (from a horizon-challenged car windscreen) in a thicket of briars and ferns by the side of the road on a shadowy autumn day with rain-drenched sunlight colours intensified under a rainbow.

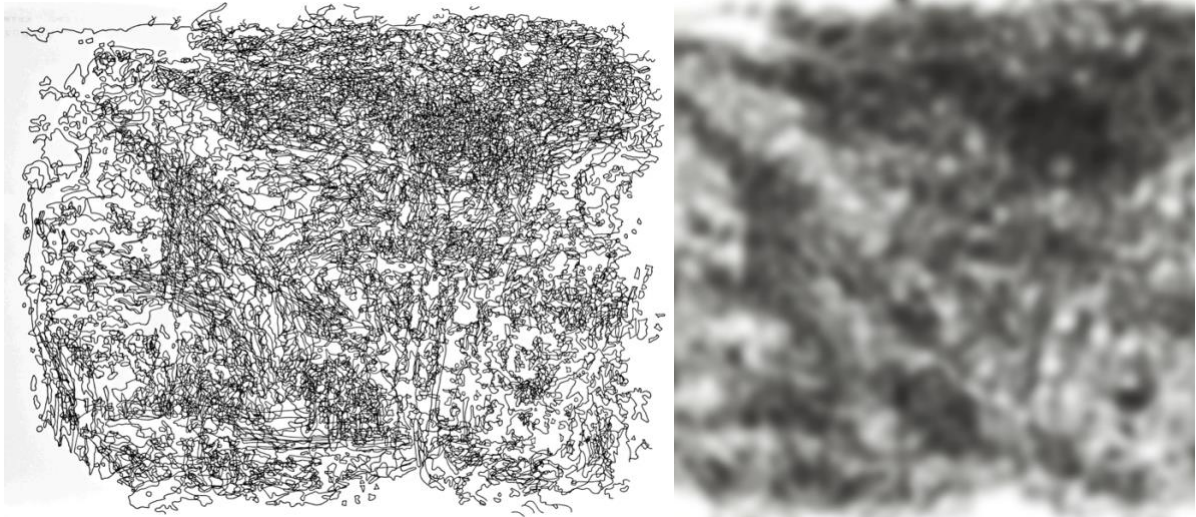
I made drawings from manipulated digital versions of the original paintings (three of which you can see above) by altering the parameters for detail and edge constraints in the cut-out filter in Photoshop. I traced these versions as line drawings projected onto paper with an overhead projector. Layer by layer, they built up into a web of interlocking abstract lines.



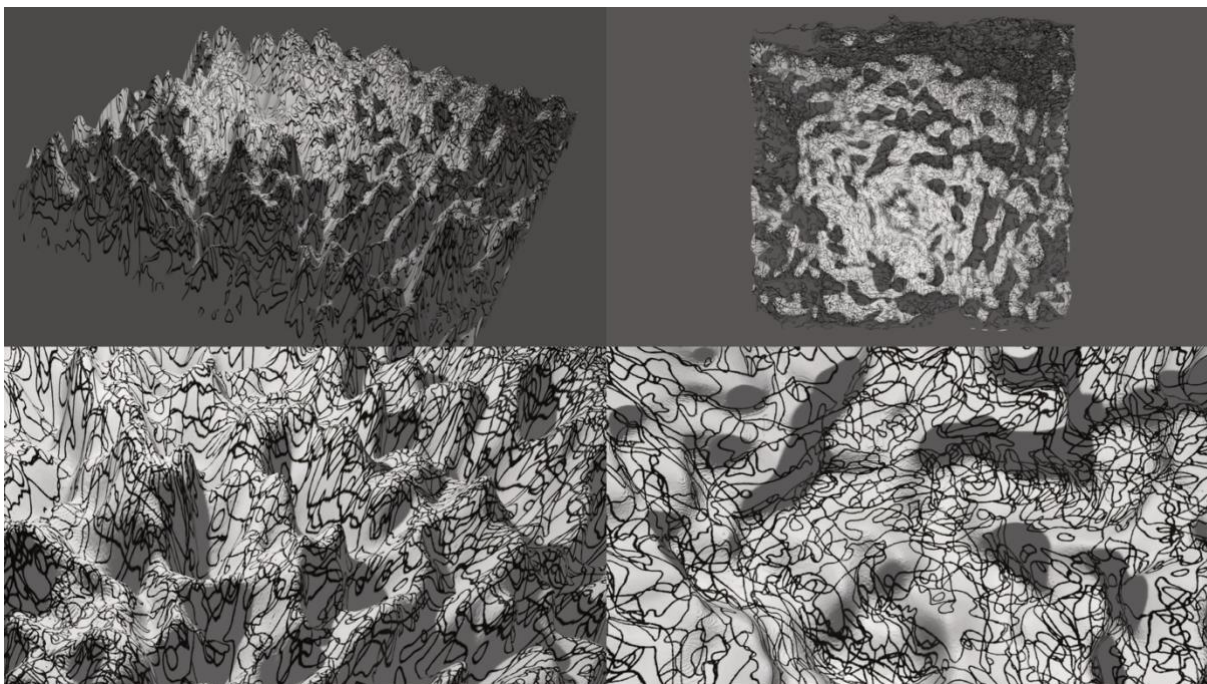
Sarah Iremonger, *Entangled Horizon 3* after *View of Powerscourt Waterfall* by G. Barret 1760, ink on paper, 52 x 70 cm, 2024

This drawing *Entangled Horizon 3* was created by tracing 12 layers of adapted digital drawings, on top of each other, turning them upside down and back to front as I went along. Layer by layer, the drawings built up into a web of interlocking abstract lines, reminding me of MRI or Lidar scans. The myriad of interlocking lines cross and recross each other obliterating the original, creating something new, scrambling and rendering the image unrecognisable, beyond reading in any fixed way. It becomes a moving mass of liminal

suggestions resisting any single reading; a visual noise appears that suggests an apophenia of not quite discernible images, faces, figures, labyrinthine landscapes with contours, indicating the highs of peaks and the lows of valleys, shifting shadows appearing and disappearing in a present absence of spatial relations suggesting 3-dimensional landscapes.



Sarah Iremonger, (right) *Entangled Horizon 2* after *View of Powerscourt Waterfall* by G. Barret 1760, ink on paper, 52 x 70 cm, 2023; Daniel Murray, (left) Blurred version of *Entangled Horizon 2*



Sarah Iremonger and Daniel Murray, Virtual digital landscapes x 4 based on drawing *Entangled Horizon 2*, 2023

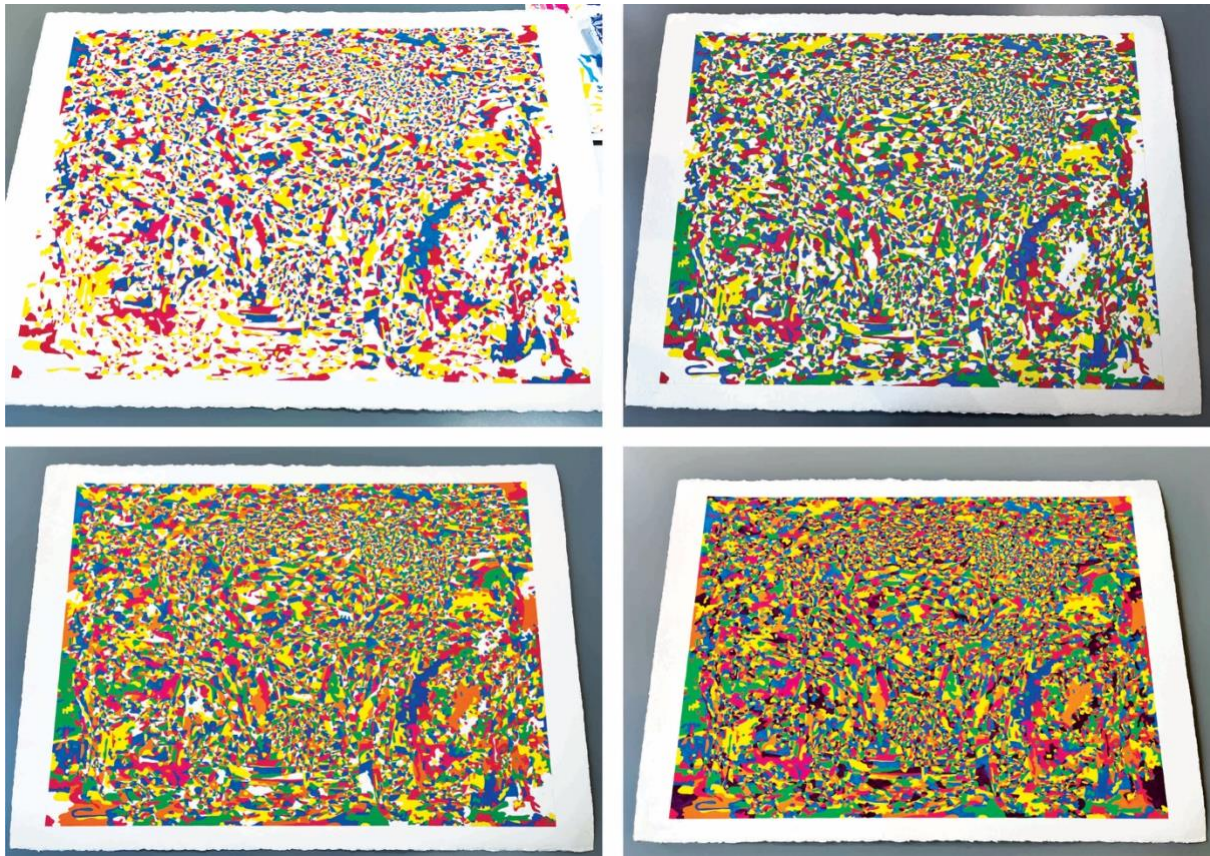
Entangled Horizon 2 was created by tracing 6 layers of the digital images, offset to complicate the original. I decided to see if this drawing could be turned into a virtual 3-D landscape, and enlisted the help of digital artist Daniel Murray. He took me through the

process, adapting this drawing so that 'Blender' could create the virtual landscape. It had to be blurred so the computer could read the image and superimpose it onto a matrix framework of defined numerical parameters to create a nuanced virtual landscape of rolling hills.

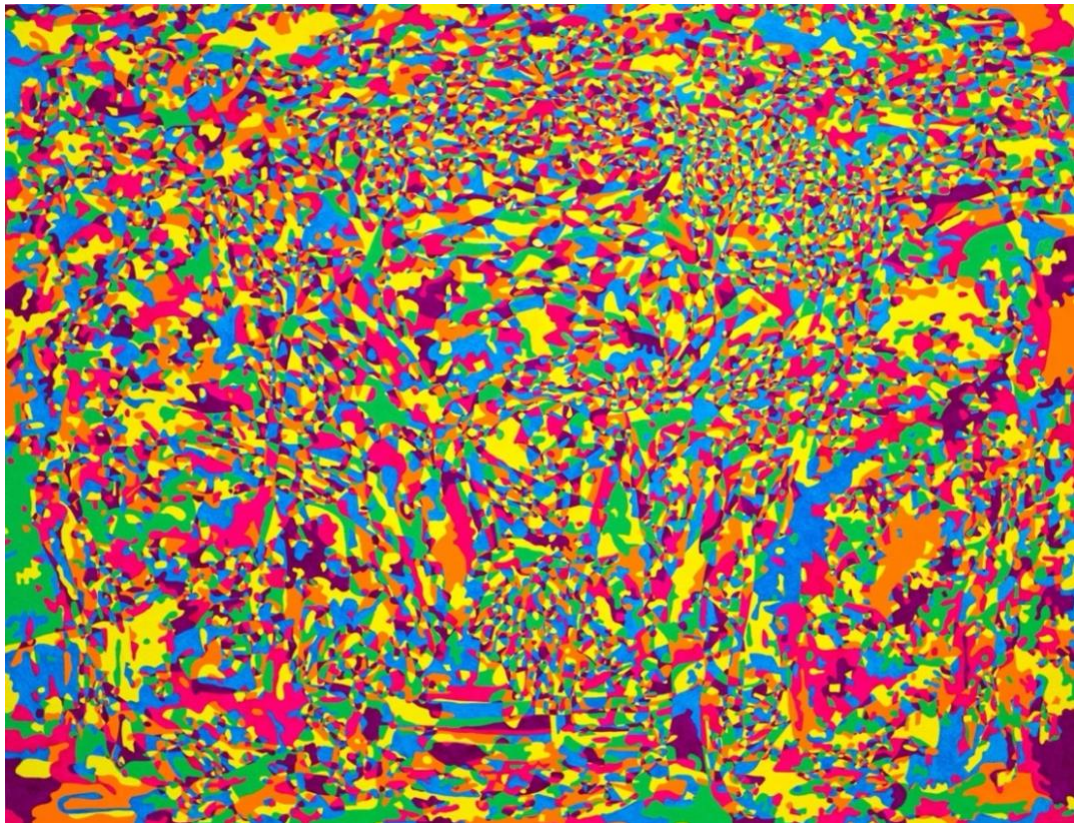
Like magic, it instantly appeared as a virtual digital world flipping the horizon of the drawing from the vertical to the horizontal, a virtual recognisable imagined landscape of nowhere. I am like a child again with a feather in my hair crouched in an imagined landscape, a nowhere place of mountain ranges familiar and unfamiliar, an unending, shifting, possibly expanded cosmic universe.

I use the same approach to making the framework which holds the colours in the paintings as I use in the drawings. Here you can see the process of painting one colour at a time in *Entangled Horizon*, painted in watercolour on paper, 2024. Painting in styles associated with colouring books and painting-by-numbers undermines and disrupts ideas of authorship and mastery. I use a systematic approach; rules are established to organise what colours will be used, where they will be placed and how they will be painted to undermine any possibility of self-expression. Here the colours are based on colour separations: cyan, magenta and yellow and their mixed variants of green, orange and purple. I use a mechanical approach to painting so that I am like a one-eyed ambient robot crawling across the surface of the painting eradicating any depth perception and diminishing aesthetic choices to chance encounters. The results are reminiscent of complex AI-generated camouflage designs, where the image is hidden in visual noise, confusing perception with no focal point or representation to lock it into space and time.

I have always loved exploring ideas about representation, how visual perception is like "the perniciousness of language ... [which] produce[s] ... fictions." I found this text highlighted by Derek in David Berman's *Berkeley, Experimental Philosophy* from 1997¹⁰ while exploring his collection of books. We would discuss how language, including visual language, is inadequate for expressing our experiences. The illusion of perception and the ephemeral flickering experience of seeing is taken to another level with digital media. I remember when I was very young, seeing shapes flash past as we drove to school and trying to work out what I was looking at; once I understood what it was (street furniture, for example) I could never unsee it, I could never see those abstract shapes again. The image of the object was fixed in my mind, understanding evolving with looking and seeing¹¹.



Sarah Iremonger, *Entangled Horizon after View of Powerscourt Waterfall* by G. Barret 1760, 4 process stages, 2024



Sarah Iremonger, *Entangled Horizon after View of Powerscourt Waterfall* by G. Barret 1760, watercolour on paper, 50 x 69 cm, 2024

Conclusion

Writing this paper has helped me to explore how our brain's thought processes situate us through representation, as a necessity to understanding reality, and how problematic this is. Can we truly describe what is out there? Technological digital advances open new ways of understanding, discovering and seeing reality, ushering in a post-representational turn that exposes a situationlessness at the heart of our perception. This requires us to realign ourselves to new modes of consciousness through our imaginations, opening up alternative ways of understanding our relationship with the world.

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