

Codes of Recognition | Carter Hodgkin



Carter Hodgkin, *The Array*, oil on canvas (24x36 in.), 1982.

Over the past 15 years, painter Carter Hodgkin has appeared in art-and-technology exhibitions worldwide, as she connects the high resolution of digital technology with the less-defined contours of the natural and handmade. This apparently incongruous pairing stems from Hodgkin's interest in design as an ordering of information in the natural world. Early on she experimented with systematic arrangements of color and line, influenced by minimalists such as Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner, as well as by early exposure to the microcomputer revolution in San Francisco; however sensual and visual, her works consistently embodied a mathematical logic. For a month in 1979, she drew in tempera and gouache on the sidewalk at 80 Langton Street in San Francisco. "Based on morphological rules embodied within the previous drawings, the patterns and organization evoking codes, messages, or genetic structure," she wrote at the time, this installation of blocks of intense color gradually progressed

ed "like a narrative almost by the sets and the sequence arranging and the laws of the order I determined for myself."

Today, Hodgkin derives imagery from magnified scans of fossilized cells, one-celled protozoa, pollen, spores, viruses, cells, blood vessels, and bone fragments, and her most recent series, *Still Life*, features ancient life forms that she projects onto canvas and paints in fierce yellow oils. Such digital imagery has come full circle, having ranged from the actual patterns of digital chips to CAT, MRI, and digital scans of the body, to precise extrapolations of the computer's power to compose and alter form. As Hodgkin says, "I investigate these images by computer, extracting structure and line." Projecting this imagery onto the traditional surface of canvas, and then painting it pattern by hand, continues a complex and ongoing historical dialogue between the body and the machine. "The world is now being defined by bits and bytes," Hodgkin points out. "Images are composed of discrete units that can be broken down and manipulated. I see impressionism as a precursor to all this."

Of course, the computer's ability to reveal patterns in nature has led to a widespread use today of biological and microscopic imagery among artists. Hodgkin's work is distinctive in its layering of mediated renderings of imagery, as well as the depth of its interaction with the computer. For many years, the artist used photosilkscreen in various combinations with paint to highlight different ways of mapping an image. In *Virtual Vacuum*, a silkscreened proton trace is overlaid with handpainted fractal geometry taken from an early fractal program. In *Split Gate*, she juxtaposed the photosilkscreened image with a more completely rendered digital counterpart: a contrast that investi-

gates up and map the patterns and lines of natural objects, and emphasizes technology's capability of unveiling natural designs that were previously invisible.

Hodgkin recognizes that the computer is not alone when divining such natural patterns in our world. She is a student of poet Jerome Rothenberg's "Technology of the Sacred," and has frequently juxtaposed patterns from "primitive" cultures and digital imagery. *Strange Attractor II*, for example, synthesizes codes: blue and green, blown-up fractal geometry is divided by a central strand of DNA, and flanked by patterns from Australian aboriginal "dreamtime" paintings. Other cultural traditions appear in material references. In the early 90s, Hodgkin took up silk, rice paper, and joss paper: materials that are often used in China and Indonesia as grounds for images that are ritually burned as offerings to ancestors. It's a reminder that the term "virtual reality" was first used by Buddhists in reference to our three-dimensional, physical world, and that our technology can be linked conceptually to something greater. As Hodgkin says, "We see types of orders that are not Western-Euclidean but more akin to a 'primitive' (tribal) understanding of the world as a complex, fluid system. Of primary importance to me is the transformation of technological content into a talismanic presence."

—Barbara Einzig