

ADA Artist Interview with Victor Acevedo

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Full text and interview by Alejandro Quiñones on ADA:

<https://www.digitalartarchive.at/features/featured-artists/featured-artist-victor-acevedo.html>

What are your current projects?

Well, my main current project is completing a 400-page career survey book booked called Acevedo in Context which covers these years and art media:

1977- 87: Analog Art: traditional media, painting, drawing, film

1983 to 2007: Digital Art: archival ink jet and photo prints

2007 to 2020: Visual Music: digital Video and digital prints

I began working on it in earnest the last couple of years; but the project really got going in 2017. There is evidence that the conceptual seed of it emerged at least 20 years ago. But it really needed to incubate for a couple of decades to really come to fruition.

It chronicles the development of my artwork and addresses the milieu from which my work emerged; that is my key art and conceptual influences as well as the creative community which fostered my work and art actions. The book's narrative is augmented by essays from four contributing authors, Peter Frank, Charlotte Frost, Thomas Miller and Michael J. Masucci. These essays are presented in addition to my personal notes and quotations. The text is completed with transcriptions from previously unpublished writings and interviews with art historian Patric Prince and scientist/crystallographer, Arthur L. Loeb.

The first half of the book is like an annotated art portfolio which tracks my work, starting from its earliest influences; through my student years in analog media and then into my digital practice. The second half is like an illustrated chronology that spotlights important art related relationships and events in my life over the years; from birth in 1954 through 2020.

The other project I am working on is a process of gradually venturing into the NFT (Non Fungible Token) market place for digital art. Although it's controversial, I believe that it is ultimately a good thing and it's a game changer and paradigm shift for the authentication and valuation of digital art. It's the first time Digital Art has properly got a foot hold in the art market.

Moreover, what is remarkable about it is that the full range of digital art can be monetized with respect to how it can be permanently linked to a token encoded on a blockchain. The full range includes, but is not limited to, single still images; time-based forms like videos and computer animations; VR and AR experiences (conveyed via installations or digital interfaces) and even physical analog media derivatives or expressions of their source digital artifacts.

What path led you to digital art and what fascinated you about it initially?

From my earliest days as an art student in the late 1970s, I had an appreciation for Art and Geometry, which came from my interest in M.C. Escher's work. In fact, in July-August 1979 I made a trip to several European countries and had the opportunity to spend a week in The Hague. There with the permission of the Gemeentemuseum, which at that time housed the M.C. Escher Archives; I was able to study Escher's personal notebooks; which contained working sketches for many of his famous zoomorphic tessellation patterns. It was the dot-to-dot coordinates on graph paper that revealed how the zoomorphic perimeter of Escher's figures were constructed.

Then later I took two classes with media theorist, Gene Youngblood at Art Center College of Design (Pasadena, CA.) in 1980-81. Both were survey classes on new developments in video art and imaging technologies. It was based on Youngblood's seminal book, *Expanded Cinema*, first published in 1970. The class continued on from where the book had left off. This was my introduction to computer graphics.

One of the pieces I saw that had a profound impact on me was the 1979 computer graphic video called *Sunstone* by Ed Emshwiller with technical support from Alvy Ray Smith, Lance Williams, and Garland Stern. It was produced at the Computer Graphics Laboratory, New York Institute of Technology. The concept of 'digital' was completely new to me at the time. For me, seeing this work was an epiphany; it was an eye-opening view into the future – the future for me personally as an artist and for the world at large.

Also, in the class I was exposed to many works of Visual Music as well the seminal digital video work of Woody and Steina Vasulka. The first memory that comes back to me is their study of video noise generated in binary sequence. The second memory is of discerning tessellations on a CRT spontaneously generated by variable electronic inputs. This came across to me as how the Escher binary figure-ground perceptual toggle could be conveyed digitally. Not only that, but Woody and Steina were also displaying video images generated by pure sound (electronic noise). This was amazing revelatory work! It clearly exemplified the coming digital revolution. It was after these experiences that I knew that I would have to seek out computer access and engage in graphical experiments of my own. This was just prior to the world cultural moment when desktop personal computers became ubiquitous in academic art curricula and society itself; so it took a few years to get regular access to the tools.

How was the transition of your work from analogue to digital media?

It was gradual because my interest was piqued when I was still fully immersed in analog media practice and before personal computers were readily accessible. My first hands on experience with what we then called computer graphics was in 1983 when I took a workshop with digital art pioneer, Frank Dietrich. After that I took a lab class with Tony Longson, who was also a pioneer in the field, originally from the UK.

By 1985 I had started to work on the Cubicomp which was an early but powerful PC-based 3D modelling and animation system. As I was learning this new digital imaging tool set; one of my approaches was to revisit pictorial subjects that I had rendered in analog media and then re-create them in the digital space. My image called *Ectoplasmic Kitchen* is an example of this. The original oil painting was from 1984 and later I produced a digital version of the image in 1987.

How has your understanding of digital media transformed over the decades?

Well from the time when I first learned about the existence of digital media in 1980, the world itself has become 'digital.' Gene Youngblood told us this was coming. As predicted often, along the way; we now live in a mediated cybernetic hybrid-reality as evidenced at entry level with the 'indispensable' need for personal computers and mobile devices in IRL (in real life); and at the emergent end of the spectrum; with the advent of immersive metaverse interactivity and technologies. I have lived through the epochal transformations that have been manifest through the deployment of digital devices in the wake of web

1.0 through web 2.0 technology and the now emergent web 3.0. Digital imaging; digital artifacts and interactive utility are quite natural to our current historical moment and are pre-existent (taken for granted) to a generation/s of humans born digital, if you will.

What would you describe as Electronic Visual Music and what would be its horizon in the present days?

As far as I know, through tracking my web searches over the years, I can take credit for coining the term Electronic Visual Music and its acronym, EVM in 2013. It was a play on EDM (Electronic Dance Music) and an update of the established genre called Visual Music. Visual Music emerged from an analog media (film-based) practice whereas contemporary visual music is now primarily digital or more generally, electronic.

I first attached the term to a Drum and Bass monthly that I was planning in 2013; but for various reasons, the events were put on hold. I do have in my archives promotional materials utilizing the term which were published privately at the time. The first time I used the term publicly was for an AV (live mix video projection) performance event at the Los Angeles Center for Digital Art (LACDA) in May 2019.

In regards to its horizon, it's open and ongoing. I'm thinking that many, if not all Visual Music works produced now and in the foreseeable future could be classified as EVM works.

What led you to experiment in the field of Electronic Visual Music?

Coming out of art school I had an interest in experimental film and having seen Ed Emshwiller's Sunstone in 1980 and many Visual Music classics further reified for me the idea of producing short abstract computer graphic animations sometimes combined with live action. I had a limited range of experience; not actually being a film student, but looking back, some of the film shorts that were influential to me included Un Chien Andalou by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí and the famous 1-minute films by the Residents. Of course, seeing many of the now historic visual music works by such artists as John and James Whitney, Jordan Belson, Oskar Fischinger, Jules Ingel and others, were part of my motion graphics DNA, so to speak.

Growing out of my interest in producing EVM studio works, I also began to follow the developments in live real-time projected visuals used to augment musical performances. It spawned my aspiration to venture into the performative side of EVM.

In about 2011 in Los Angeles, I started attending underground Electronic Dance Music club nights; usually featuring drum and bass or the abstract and instrumental hip hop of say, Low End Theory; and as a newbie, I saw a need and an opening for visuals there. In 2014, for a time I was the resident visualist for a couple different of Drum and Bass collectives. In fact, UK Digital artist William Latham was a role model for me, as he applied his work to Rave culture in the 1990s; I felt that it was more than OK do similar in the 2010s.

In 2011 I also joined the Los Angeles Video Artists (LAVA) and started attending their monthly meetings. Within that community I learned how to perform and project live mix video using applications that can run on a MacBook Pro. In doing so, combined my interest in contemporary electronic bass music with concepts in Digital Cinema and Synergetic Geometry. My music video work and live visual (VJ) performances were informed by a synthesis of both these traditions, disciplines, and resultant phenomenologies.

It turned out that my interest in visual performance was seemingly paralleled by an explosion of large-scale visual spectacle at music festivals. It was digital technology that supported this perennial visual

form to blow up and be writ large in the cultural landscape. This massive explosion caused me to rethink my personal role in the idiom.

I decided that the best way forward for me was to take a step back and reconvene with my core sensibilities and to get back on track with my essential digital art mission; which now included the incorporation of real-time AV work-flows as part of my studio practice. I also sought out opportunities to collaborate with electronic musicians that were operating outside the realm of purely Dance Music; such as the band called Hookah and the circuit bender, Igor Amokian (Chris Holland) and modular synth players like J3M5 (James Allen) and Rex Bruce (whom coincidentally was the director of LACDA)

At this juncture it was clear that I wanted to more deeply explore the implications of synesthesia and cymatics as well as the use of computer animation based on Buckminster Fuller's Synergetics. Much of my video work now investigates the intersection of electronic music and audio synthesis as in drone or glitch works, harmonic noise and dynamic geometrical structure.

When you collaborate live with sound artists and musicians, how would you describe the artistic development of your works as a collective/individual process?

For me it's very similar to Jazz improvisation in a duo or group setting. Although as a visualist I will have at ready a catalogue of pre-recorded visual loops; the live mix and the interaction with the musician/s is facilitated in the moment by an interplay of the software's audio active intelligence with the manually driven and intuitive mix choices made on the fly. Again, using the Jazz metaphor; real-time mixing and the transformational image processing of the video source material is not unlike improvising over known chord progressions and extrapolating beyond a known or given composition; It's a fluid extemporaneous sequential synthesis of variable combinations of imagery and abstract visual form or phenomena over time. And of course, recordings of such performances can be brought back to the studio and entered into the nonlinear post-production (video editing) workflow.

How does the rapid development of the interfaces employed in your artworks influence your artistic process?

It keeps it evolving and challenges me to find a new leading edge. However, I'm on pause with breaking new ground at the moment as I've been mostly working on the book; which is essentially an exercise in looking back. But it feels like a natural and necessary part of the career process; which will then allow me to spring forward on my life trajectory with a kind of gathered coherence and momentum. Or at least that is what I tell myself! (laugh)

How do you observe the interest in digital art in your surroundings? Do you think it has risen with the presence of new media technologies and social media in people's lives?

I see it more and more, everywhere in some form. Yes, absolutely! NFTs; the Blockchain and the multiple Web 3.0 metaverses that are emerging and taking culture-at-large into a new realm. And that is building on the current ubiquity of personal computers and mobile devices. I just saw a replay on Youtube of Beeple on the Tonight show, which is a nationally televised chat variety show that attracts millions of viewers each night in the U.S. Here we have a digital visual artist becoming a household word. This is an unprecedented moment.

In some of your early works, like NYC 1983-85 or 6.26.27.86 v01 you show abstract and geometrical paintings combined with photo graphical studies. How would you describe the processes behind these artworks in correlation with digital graphics?

It's nice that you asked about NYC 1983-85; it was recently curated into a large survey show called Techspressionism 2021 (<https://techspressionism.com>). It is installed online in Kunstmatrix and will be available for view indefinitely. Although this image was created in 1993, it's based on a photograph taken in the 1980s.

I wrote a description of the piece; I'd like to share it with you now,

The title of the piece is the result of me conflating two different trips to New York City. One trip was in July 1983 and the other in November 1985. Each visit shared some of the same cast of characters and locales so that added to the mix up. The image is based on a photograph that I took at a party in an East Village apartment. Being rather new to the hip fluid ambience of downtown New York, I found it quite cool and exciting. For me this image captures the buzz of the event.

The quasi-Surrealist character of the piece was a cryptic nod to Salvador Dali – especially with the inverted and abstracted crutch in the top center and the attenuated eye-object projections (cone, cube and hard-edged torus) emanating from the protagonist's face on the left.

The cascading flotsam and jetsam geometry; some of which being intact and platonic is a metaphor for the free-flow of thought forms or multi-valent chat, both lucid and confused emanating from the brain of the main figure and interconnected to others in the room with their ritualistic objects interface: a metaphysical snapshot of a joyful epiphanous moment. Note the refractive smoke bubble pipe held in the hand of the mirrored reveler.

This was the first time I introduced a muted semi-monochrome palette into my work. I utilized 3D models generated entirely on a Macintosh computer – using the software called Strata 3D. Those separately rendered 3D components were then composited into the photographic space imaged by scanning the original 35mm slide.

I believe this image falls nicely under the Techspressionist rubric as it's an image created using technology - primarily computer graphic tools and it combines an emotional, expressive subjectivity with the inexorable neutrality of geometrical structure.

6.26-27.86 is named after the approximate date that my older brother David Acevedo passed away. The exact time is not known. It was very late on the 26th or very early on the 27th of June, 1986. The 3D geometry was rendered with the Cubicomp using an app designed to generate geodesic domes. Later parts of the image were modified on a Mac with Photoshop 2.5 - for instance the quasi-cubist deconstruction and re-assembly of the still life in the lower left corner.

This was around the time that I switched over to the Mac. The young woman in the picture always reminded me of a blind-folded Mona-Lisa. It also referenced those funny old-fashion adult magazines that had tape over the people's eyes to hide their identity. Later versions of this woman were rendered in a kind of neo-cubist manner. One of the underlying metaphors that ran through many of my images from this period was the juxtaposition of neutral geometrical form (polyhedra) with interpretive subjective psychologies rendered with a vocabulary of neo-abstract expressionism by way of digital mark making. Come to think of it, apart from the digital aspect, this conceptual synthesis was already in play for me many years ago, when I was still working in analog; with oil paint and graphite.

Do you think that the use of digital graphics within artistic practice is more like photography or painting? Why?

I believe that with most things it's on a spectrum. In regards to 2D images, it's potentially a balanced hybrid between the two media; how much of each is down to the approach of the particular artist; technique wise and conceptually. This will factor into the process and its end results. It's clear that image processing and paint program software have transformed photography into a more painterly medium. In the early 80's I thought of computer graphics as "the new painting." And that newness included the fact that photographic concepts and imagery was rolled into it.

Beyond that, pictures or pictorial elements that are purely the product of 3D computer graphics bring the element of (virtual) sculpture into the mix. Moreover, given computer graphics' time-based prowess and ability to author or facilitate interactive experiences, it is truly a new medium.

How do you archive your own works? How do you think your works should be preserved?

On hard drives and perhaps on the cloud in several locations.

Are your works always mutable and transformable, or do they acquire a specific state where they cannot or should not be modified?

Both. 'Destroy, modify or leave it the same' these are the three key choices available to a living artist regarding their own work. I use to think that for the most part, works from your past should stand as they are, but given the easy editing or transformational capabilities of digital media; it's ok to modify them. As long as an artist is still living; all of their work is potentially a 'work in progress', and they have the discretion to modify, correct or update an existing work and make a new and perhaps an improved version of it. That's how I look at it anyway.

Do you think there should be a special archive's format for your work?

I'm not actually sure what you mean here, but yes.

To finish we would like to ask you about your experience working with ADA, what characteristics do you think are valuable and what could be improved?

Thanks so much for reaching out and requesting this interview. It has been a lovely opportunity and a great honor to do it. I believe that the ADA is providing a great service in collecting the bios, statements and work samples of so many important contemporary digital artists. It is a great resource for Art historians and anybody with a keen interest in the field.

On the technical support side, ADA support staff has been responsive and quite helpful whenever I had issues with the interface. I suppose there are areas of it that could be updated or re-designed, but for the most part the website works well and is quite effective in housing and delivering data on Digital Art and artists as well as Digital Art institutions and key events and exhibitions that have taken place through the years.

The ADA team would like to thank Victor Acevedo for his contribution to the ADA platform.

Text and Interview (CC) by Alejandro Quiñones

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