

VAS VISUAL ART eNEWSLETTER

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Petra Cortright, "sapphire cinnamon viper fairy," installation view, 2022, Palm Springs Art Museum. Courtesy Palm Springs Art Museum.

Petra Cortright, "sapphire cinnamon viper fairy" by Jody Zellen

Palm Springs Art Museum
Continuing through March 26, 2023

Behind a huge entry wall with a large-scale, multi-panel, digitally produced photographic landscape, an array of 50, same-sized monitors looping numerous different short videos awaits. The video in "Petra Cortright: sapphire cinnamon viper fairy" were created between 2007 and 2022. Cortright first garnered attention with a series of video self portraits uploaded to YouTube, made by posing or performing in front of the web-cam on her computer. These campy videos would often depict her in costume, cavorting and twirling seductively for the camera. She also incorporated stock digital effects and screen savers, overlaying them into the imagery. These performative videos are juxtaposed with several screen recordings of Cortright's layered Photoshop compositions. The exhibition reveals the process of building some of the digital landscape prints on view in the rest of the exhibit.

This video wall serves as the index to the exhibition and provides the trajectory of Cortright's process. She emerged as a net artist in 2007, segued into showing videos and installations, and has now transitioned to creating printed images filled with fragments of appropriated imagery, and her own digital/drawn gestures. While the mesmerizing video wall serves as a summary, the focus of the exhibition is the printed digital landscapes.

Five small-scale framed works ("Flash Stills") serve as an entry point to Cortright's process. The label accompanying these prints relates how she created the series by hacking into the software used to generate

animated screensavers in order to extract 'content' that she later manipulated and collaged together. Out of this came a suite of surreal images that purposely disrupt the calming nature of the originals.

To fabricate her larger pieces, Cortright composites hundreds of layers of textures and photographic imagery. While some of her pictures are her own, most of her imagery is culled from online sources. In these complex collages, she often plays with the relationships between different digital artifacts, as well as high- and low-resolution graphics that confound viewers' comprehension of scale and source material.

Some of her imagery is clearly recognizable, for example in "SHIRLEY'S OF HOLLYWOOD_Seismologist essay_sea kayaker magazine SCHEMATICS GUITAR" (2021) "real" flower petals, leaves, fruit and a vase are intertwined with abstracted lines and gestures made in Photoshop by stroking through layers of color and imagery, obscuring any photographic veracity.

"Gazzetta Ufficiale SCHOLARSHIP SEARCH 'smoking fetish' uk hardcore" (2021) is a 59 by 84-inch digital painting on anodized aluminum that appears to change hues and tonalities depending on how the light reflects off its shimmering surface. The imagery resembles elements found in the landscape or seascape as it is filled with clumps of plant life, tufts of salmon colored grass that could also be interpreted as flames.

Cortright's source material is endlessly mutable. Because she is not overly concerned with differences in resolution, these elements are repeated, enlarged, silhouetted and blurred. She unabashedly appropriates from "the endless digital realm" to fabricate works that freely mix the banal with the otherworldly. Rather than obscure her process, Cortright exhibits variations that allow us to compare and contrast how adding or subtracting layers changes the work. This is most clearly evident across "1 yr tbill const mat wkly_1998 election results Yavapai County Arizona, Africa Map_anime+manga+background_arbeitsbl%otter fernsehen, Babyface_Behandlung Muskelkrankheiten.calendar 1998," and "70's television cartoons_Accommodations in Sidney, Australia" (all 2022), where a central "tree" is surrounded by different compositional elements.

Using fragments, pixels and broken-down imagery, Cortright has invented a new vocabulary of paint-like gestures that she has extracted and repurposed from aspects of the original source material. While she may be a painter who does not use paint, Cortright's works, although sometimes printed on canvas or linen, do not transcend the digital, and in fact are more successful when they embrace their origin rather than when she attempts to mask it.

Cortright's aesthetic is abstract and ambiguous, more about reaching for a digital sublime than about the goings-on in the world. That said, her titles root the pieces in the present, as they are mash-ups of words and phrases from the internet that often don't seem to relate at all to the content of the images. These titles are as enigmatic and puzzling as her imagery, and harken back to her early work as an internet artist.

Cortright's tools are computer software and a range of digital printers, and her source material is the internet. She uses these elements as artists from pre-digital eras used brushes, pens, pencils, paint and canvas. It is with insight, skill, and determination that this prolific artist has mastered her tools and continues to push boundaries

Jody Zellen is a LA based writer and artist who creates interactive installations, mobile apps, net art, animations, drawings, paintings, photographs, public art, and artist's books. Zellen received a BA from Wesleyan University (1983), a MFA from CalArts (1989) and a MPS from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program (2009). She has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1989. For more information please visit www.jodyzellen.com.