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Astrid Preston, *Upside Down World* at Craig Krull Gallery  
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By Jody Zellen



Astrid Preston paints the landscape. She is infatuated by the wonders and beauty of nature and her works often depict rolling hills, ponds with lily pads and flower-filled gardens glistening in the daylight. While how and what is seen is a motivating factor, she is also interested in the philosophy of perception. In past works, she transformed the world around her into painted representations that are more realistic than abstract, often focusing on details. What a place or scene encompassed and evoked predominated these compositions. It is only recently that she allows grids of colors to share the space with images from nature.

Pointillism is an art historical term referring to those Impressionist artists who reduced the observable world into small dots or points. In many ways, the dots of the past relate to the pixels of the present. In her current body of work, *Upside Down World*, Preston disrupts her otherwise smooth and pristine depictions of the natural environment with painted pixels. In the digital world the pixel is a unit of measurement. It has become a common term when speaking about imagery— the more pixels per area the greater the resolution. It is interesting to think about the relationship between the fact that nature is created from particles too small for the eye to see, and pictures are now created as amalgamations of invisible pixels. Preston is choosing to make the invisible visible by transforming nature into a series of colored pixels.

How does the representation of pixels function in a work like *Veiled*, 2017. *Veiled* is a modest sized oil painting of a green field, distant trees and body of water reflecting the bright blue sky.

The center of the composition is realistically rendered in exacting detail, whereas the sides of the image are veiled, as if seen through a lens that overlays the observable world with a grid of half-inch pixels. Preston's pixels are not mechanically produced. They are hand painted with soft edges and the larger ones show the thick texture of her brush-strokes. While *Veiled* contains pixels of approximately the same size, in a painting like *Autumn Song*, 2016 Preston infuses the landscape with pixels of different proportions. Eighth to quarter inch pixels become Autumn tree leaves and their reflection in a blue-green lake, while one half to three quarter inch pixels abstract the center of the composition where land meets water.

his range in size brings up questions about levels of abstraction and how realistic a work must be to resonate as a recognizable landscape. Can a composition filled with a colorful array of small squares trigger recognition? Is it supposed to? Preston remarks, "When painting, I find that smaller pixels have better resolution and depth. The larger, textured ones are more atmospheric. For me, it is about analog technique with digital detail." The process of painting pixels involves breaking down the picture plane into a pattern of colored squares and creating an algorithm to determine what color goes where. This technique is observed in *Tree Dreams*, 2016 where four trees on the left side of the painting are stylistically rendered and placed on an impressionistically colored ground. Preston transforms the sole tree on the right side of the painting into a grid of pixels, extrapolating its component colors into an abstraction. The more geometric tree on the right side is surrounded by bright yellow squares— precisely opposite the blue sky on the paintings left side.

Preston is interested in the relationship between object and sensation: what is felt or intuited as opposed to what is seen or observed. This dialectic is articulated through painting as Preston's pixels are laden with texture which foregrounds their presence in the work, while the illusionistically represented landscapes recede, creating surprising layerings within the compositions. The pixels also cause intriguing double takes as in *Along the Canal*, 2016 where they appear sporadically and become a subtle intervention. To pixelate is not to blur. Rather, it is a process of enlarging a smaller area to become pure color. To pixelate is also to disguise. Preston's use of pixelation does both, it obscures and abstracts simultaneously, making an ordinary observed landscape into something fabricated and extraordinary.

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