

LAWEEKLY

When Creating Paintings, Amir Nikravan Tries to Mimic Photoshop

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Categories: [Art](#), [Galleries](#)



- Courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires
- Amir Nikravan's *Untitled (Site 9)*

Painter David Hockney, the moody Brit turned part-time Angeleno who made those fantastically flat, sunny pool paintings in the 1960s, had no idea, when Adobe executives invited him up to Silicon Valley in 1989, that he would become obsessed with drawing on his iPhone. Adobe was launching a program it was calling Photoshop, and Hockney doesn't exactly know why the execs wanted him there. Maybe they'd seen that photocollage of a highway he'd made, which almost looked computer-generated. But he arrived with his dogs and his assistant, Richard, tried out the new program and saw what was coming: The one-hour photo shops would disappear, and drawings and paintings would start to look like photographs. It would all become "rather boring," he feared.

If you go out to look at art around L.A. right now, even if you are not bored, you will see at nearly every stop the influence of digitally manipulated imagery or the computer screen experience. This is no longer new news, by any means, but it's still current news.

At newly opened Harmony Murphy Gallery downtown, Joel Holmberg has installed two paintings that look exactly like computer screen ads, peaceful blue skiescapes in front of white lettering. He's mimicking the digital look with old-school painterly tools, in an attempt, as the press release puts it, to be "all-inclusive" and to re-examine the "haughtily divided" virtual and real. But you want to stare attentively at his screen paintings for only about as long as you want to stare at a screen.

Nearby, at Ibid Projects on Santa Fe Avenue, Brazil-born, L.A.-based Christian Rosa's paintings may be abstract and on canvas, but they recall doodles done on a computer with their all-on-the-surface clarity. They photograph nicely, too. It's not that there aren't nuances that only translate in person; it's just that you really do get an accurate feel by looking at the JPEGs.

Photographing well is a key trait of a lot of what has been called "post-Internet art," a term coined seven years ago that mostly means "made in the wake of the Internet." One example is those compressed paintings by artists such as Parker Ito or Frederick Vaerslev in which, regardless of how many materials are used (paint, sand, tar), everything seems to coexist on a single, depth-free layer.

Selling well is another trait of such work, and there are theories about why. Critic Michael Sanchez hypothesized that paintings like this, minimal and under control but Internet-aware, still the effects of a scrolling screen, "inducing in the viewer a state of relaxation."

When you see Amir Nikravan's new paintings on the Internet, they seem to fit this bill pretty perfectly. They look minimal and calculated, with consistent texture and certain slickness to them.

But, in fact, his images don't photograph well at all, and if you go to see them at Various Small Fires, where they are up now as part of "Merge Visible," you probably will find that they make far less sense in person than they do online. In person, they look like photographs from a distance, though when you get close you can tell they're made with paint on fabric. Certain edges or shapes blur together unexpectedly or look pixellated. Stare at one spot for a while and you might get disoriented, as you do with *Untitled (Site 9)*, an 8-foot-tall painting with swirling patterns and made with paint used for green screens.

Nikravan, an L.A. native who started his undergraduate art career making photorealistic paintings, titled his show after a Photoshop function that involves collapsing all visible layers into one. "I've made myself a computer in a way," he says. "And I don't mean that cynically at all."

He's sincerely interested in the feel and results of employing repetitive, machine-like moves. For example: If you do what a machine does, only in a hands-on way with art-studio materials, what kind of physical image-viewing experience can you produce?

To make the methodical abstractions on view at *Various Small Fires*, which appear monochromatic even when he uses multiple colors, Nikravan starts with a wood panel. He then uses concrete or maybe store-bought rocks to build up patterns that are about two inches thick on that panel — a grid or a lattice, perhaps. Then he stretches muslin over the built-up surface before also wrapping the whole thing, panel and fabric, in vacuum-forming plastic. This causes the fabric to adhere tightly to the three-dimensional surface. When he removes the plastic, he can spray-paint, with a matte paint called Cel-Vinyl, which cartoonists often use. Because the surface is still 3-D, if he sprays a lighter color from one angle, for instance, it might make all the peaks and bumps look as if they're lit from that side when he pulls off the fabric and mounts it to thin aluminum. It's now totally flat, but there's evidence of the fact that it was once three-dimensional, albeit confusing evidence. You can't tell what process he went through just by looking.

"You're ultimately only able to deal with the very last layer. All the moves and gestures have been compressed into that single layer. It's all there, but it's kind of always at bay, too," Nikravan says. "They feel very alien, like they've kind of arrived from nowhere."

If many of today's artists work with images on computer screens and then replicate them physically, Nikravan's process is the opposite, using a physical process to mimic computers. The work helps draw attention to an issue that bothers Hockney, now 77: Now that artists, Hockney included, use much of digital technology as part of their process, technicalities are less openly discussed. Why don't the mechanics of getting the image you want, like light sources or blurriness, get written about or hashed out more often, and if they're not talked about, will people forget such problems exist?

"Painting is always historically discussed as the build-up of many, many layers over time," Nikravan says. In a virtuosic painting by Rembrandt, or in something rougher and earthier from de Kooning's *Women* series, you can see all the evidence of a painter's labor and touch that build up into the finished product. You're invited to think about the details. But when something looks calculated in a machine-like way, it pushes you away from thoughts about human touch and nuances.

This divide between the aloofness of a technologically produced object and the intimacy of an idiosyncratic artwork is what projects such as Nikravan's straddle.

Jeff Elrod, an artist who has been working with Photoshop as tool and source since the late 1990s, recently did a series of paintings that blew the Photoshop blur effect up to intense proportions. You would see seven feet of blurred shapes and shades — the images were ultimately abstractions, with no recognizable figures — and you'd be unable to focus on any one aspect. But they drew you in.

They make "the act of seeing uncommonly visceral," *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith said when she saw a group of them at MoMA P.S.1 on Long Island last year. It's a funny statement, because providing visceral visual experiences has often been the whole point of dimensional artworks. She must have meant that it's uncommon for something that originated on a screen.

AMIR NIKRAVAN: MERGE VISIBLE | Various Small Fires, 812 N. Highland Ave., Hlywd. | Through Nov. 8 | vsf.la