

The Pictorial Intelligence of Monica Tap

by [Sally McKay](#) on June 13, 2012



Monica Tap, *Six Ways From Sunday (Tuesday)*, 2011, Oil on canvas, 60 x 100 inches.

In her recent exhibition, [Six Ways from Sunday](#), at Wynick Tuck Gallery in Toronto, Monica Tap stages an aesthetic translation between digital media and oil painting. Tap collects source material for her large, lush paintings by shooting highly compressed digital video through the side window of a fast-moving car. Working conceptually, Tap exploits the subject of landscape to make historically situated interventions—in the past she has explicitly referenced Canadian art historical icons such as Homer Watson and David Milne. Her current series marks a departure from her previous work, in that the mediated nature of perception itself is more significant than art historical reference.

The six large paintings of sun-drenched forest depict a series of consecutive frames pulled from a half-second of video. Spectral, semi-transparent, tree-like entities vibrate with kinetic energy, suspended somewhere between the camera's capture, the artist's process and the viewer's eye. "The camera does not see the way human eyes see," says Tap. "It opens up to something else, another realm." This other realm is not supernatural, but aesthetic, an interstitial zone between artwork and audience, a material experience of perception itself. At every viewing distance—from scoping the entire room to standing with nose-to-canvas—the tension between abstraction and representation remains in play. But what is represented? Is it a deep space, or a flat stream of data? Tap keeps this tension taut as well, melding landscape and screen capture as simultaneous translations in paint.

If you spin in the middle of the gallery, the effect is like being immersed in a giant animated GIF. Tap gave me permission to [GIF-ify the JPEGs](#) from her [online documentation](#), and Tap herself has playfully re-animated past works in both GIF and flip-book form. For all her levity, however, there is nothing trite about Tap's engagement with digitization — no cartoonish painted pixels here.

In contrast to James Bridle's notion of the so-called "New Aesthetic" ([recently critiqued on AFC](#)), Tap does not pit digital images against "real" objects, but rather explores the temporal materiality of digital

compression through the language of paint. She explains, “The way I shoot video, the stills themselves have no pictorial intelligence. My project is to work within the constraints of each composition. The video still represents a razor thin slice of time. Each painting can take weeks. Looked at one way, I’m filling the gallery with just one half-second; but it’s taken me months to do that.”

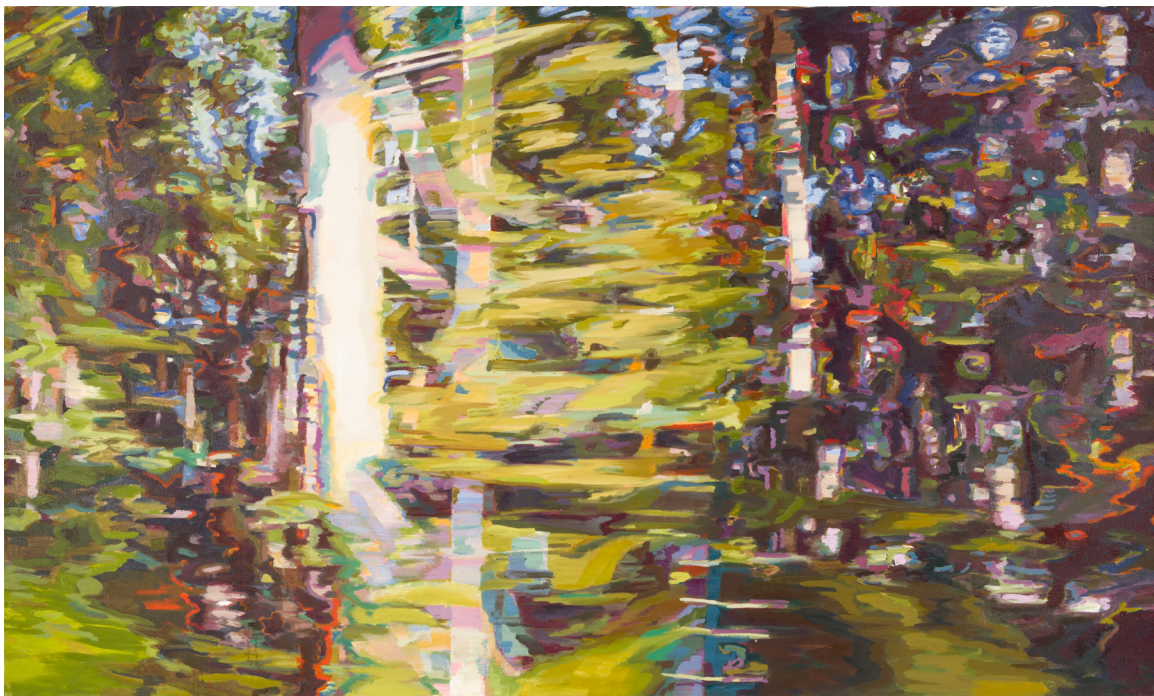


Detail, *Six Ways From Sunday* (Tuesday)

In this age of ubiquitous digital documentation, paintings IRL often appear dull and leaden compared to their on-screen counterparts. Such is not the case with these works, which are at least as luminous as the JPEGs on Tap’s website. On initial viewing, I thought that Tap had created impressions of light by leaving areas of the canvas unpainted. I was wrong. All the depth and luminance is carefully rendered in thick paint. The paintings seem to emit light, like a screen, not because lighter areas are shining through from behind, but because Tap has paid close attention to the kinds of colours captured by the camera. Likewise, the digital-look and feel emerges through Tap’s precise, measured manipulation of the visual language of paint. “I don’t blend the brushstrokes to get a blurred effect,” says Tap, and indeed, all the blurriness is painstakingly constructed with discrete, detailed brushstrokes and nuanced colour combinations. While Tap is clearly utilizing a semiotic lexicon of painting tropes, her works exude none of the arch irony common to painters who are anxious to demonstrate their art school education. Tap’s brushstrokes belong to the language of painterly abstraction, making reflexive reference to themselves as physical indexes of the process of their own making, but they equally serve to describe a visually compelling, illusionistic space. Each area of the canvas functions as a dense, vibrant, spatio-temporal world unto itself.

Tap is highly conscious of how video compression works in time. In temporal, inter-frame compression, the camera retains data about the frames it has just captured, using that information to decide which new data to store and which to discard. In Tap’s words, “the next frame is constructed in conversation with frames that precede and follow it — the data of each frame is interconnected with that of its neighbours.” Time and motion are intimately connected in video compression, as movement triggers changes in data recorded over time. If you were to point the camera at the floor of an empty room, each of the frames would contain very similar data. Tap stresses the limits of the technology by shooting fast motion at a slow

frame rate. The short segment of video that she selected for *Six Ways from Sunday* represents the motion of the camera as it speeds past a forest, and yet, broken into still frames, it also has a kind of static quality as each data set informs the others. The motion parallax of the camera's view produces strange spatial relations, as distant elements are captured in sharp focus, while those in the foreground manifest as ephemeral, transparent ribbons of colour. Tap builds on these material properties of digital video as she massages and inflects the depth of each composition. Giving her full attention to one painting at a time, she usually begins by projecting the digital image onto the blank canvas to block in the composition. Once she gets going, however, the complex painted spaces take on a life of their own. At this point, she will refer back to the original frame in multiple forms—on her laptop, her iPad, printouts—and she will also make small preliminary acrylic sketches to get a handle on the process of translation. While the digital image provides the overall composition and acts as a guideline for colour choice, Tap treats each canvas as its own, unique form of painted, pictorial space. As the series develops, she will sometimes go back and rework some of the paintings so that they hold their own in relation to the others. Tap explains that “the camera fails to stop the image,” and that it is her task, as a painter, to draw out the spatio-temporal qualities that may inhere within each painting.



Monica Tap, *Six Ways From Sunday (Wednesday)*, 2011, Oil on canvas, 60 x 100 inches.

There is a metaphysics of aesthetics at work here that, frankly, blows Bridle's notion of the “New Aesthetic” out of the water. In his 1990 book *Techniques of the Observer*, art historian Jonathan Crary traces cultural constructions of vision through the use of various 18th and 19th century technologies. The camera obscura, for example, suggests that visual information is external to the viewer, filtering into a darkened space from the world beyond. By contrast, the stereoscope locates vision in the nervous systems of observers as they perceptually combine two images to create a sense of depth. I would argue that the potent and persistent myth of virtual reality externalizes visual cognition, detaching the eyes-brain from the body as if our ongoing aesthetic engagements with luminous screens have no material impact IRL. Human perception is deeply cultural, and digital technology is part of the cultural medium in which many of us swim.

Bridle's "New Aesthetic" is somewhat useful because he emphasises that the perpetual use of digital technology has an effect on how we see. The problem, however is that he perpetuates a false dichotomy between digital imagery and the real world. In [a recent L Magazine essay](#), Paddy Johnson quoted Bridle as saying, "There's an insistent futurism of wanting to see these representations coming into the world and becoming real." But digital images are not supernatural phantoms; they are material phenomena in and of the world already. A pixel on a screen has just as much physical presence as a pixel on a t-shirt, a sculpture, or a billboard. By missing this fact, Bridle misses the critical potential of aesthetic experience to produce awareness of how technology conditions everyday perception, choosing instead to focus on trending fashions in various types of product design.

In 1968, Marshall McLuhan wrote, "One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water, since they have no anti-environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in." Technology, he suggests, is like the water, and we can't really know technological media because our experience is so deeply embedded within it. But what if the fish is an artist who confounds perception in order to question the nature of the world? Tap's paintings bring vision itself into awareness. Engaging directly with the materiality of digital aesthetics, she offers viewers the chance to experience physical properties of video compression as translated into richly painted, spatial planes. As landscapes, the paintings are thoroughly satisfying, engaging viewers cognitively with the visual conditions of their world.

[Monica Tap](#) will be living and painting in NYC from June through September. Her upcoming exhibition, Road Work, will be on view at String Gallery, Wells College in Aurora, New York from October 16 – December 6, 2012.