

2019
by Marta Gnyp



Marta: Let's just start with the most basic question that everybody's asking; what is a digital painting. Could you tell me how you make your paintings?

Otto Ford: Sure. I don't think there is a difference between traditional and digital painting. They are one and the same dialogue and come from the same history. The paintings I create very much use a materiality that other forms of other painting media contain. All art is digital, either through the artists processes creating the work or the viewers' consumption of the work. Initially I just wanted to do something different within the medium of painting or something else within art. I was trying to change things and approach making work from a different angle. I wanted to push art somewhere it wasn't really looking or exploring. To do this I started to create a database of online workers responses to my questions. As a form of research and over five years this database became an imaginative space of thousands of online workers text-based answers or thoughts. This inspired me to start to think about data, text, visual material, art and painting in a different way.

Marta: You were sitting behind a computer and sending questions into the air and people would responding to it?

Otto Ford: Yeah

Marta: Could you give me a concrete example of what would be a question?

Otto Ford: I started out with pretty straightforward questions; *'Describe where you're sitting'*, *'Describe what you're hearing'*. Just very short questions. Over time I realized that there were certain questions that would open up a person's imagination and they would just write a lot more of an answer. An early example of that would be: *'Describe something that you saw, and then thought about it later, but didn't verbalize it to anyone'*. This whole process resulted in a database which is kind of like a massive spreadsheet of imaginative human thoughts. They are like thousands of microfilm scripts, some that are inspiration to me.



Marta: This Excel spreadsheet are words. How do you translate the words into images?

Otto Ford: Part of the struggle with the process is having to read through thousands of answers to find anomalies that have the potential to become part of an image.

For example, I did a series of research called '*Messages for space*' that was loosely based on the concept of the *Arecibo Message* sent out in the 1970's. People became actively engaged in this idea and it created a huge response. '*Owls are not what they seem.*', '*Marry me, Susan*', '*Swimming pools are great for storing water.*', '*Don't come here.*' are some examples that spring to mind. There's a lot of humor, light and dark in the responses and texture too. So the data started to feel more like real a raw material. I basically found myself manifesting my own malleable material to start creating images from.

Marta: Does the data-processing or translating into images take loads of time?

Otto Ford: Yeah, it's really intensive. I love the language of images, so it is really enjoyable but sometimes I'll spend hours trying to find color, tone or textures that fit in with what a person has written in a particular answer.

Marta: Are you thinking about colors when you think about your data?

Otto Ford: Yeah, colors, tones and moving image. Creating these works is very much like a jazz ensemble, it's not really fixed in preset structures. It's a playful and organic material, kinda like exploring the early years of the internet. When I think about the data I'm reminded of this programming language called Lisp and how programmers describe the experience of learning it. They '*Grok*' with the code or become equal to it to try to understand more about it. This concept to '*Grokking*' with something I think we as artists do a lot of.

Marta: Could I say that you actually painted with human thoughts?

Otto Ford: Yeah, you could look at it like that.

Marta: After years spent on research you're are probably very skilled with technology?

Otto Ford: I'm not a programmer but I think it's important to understand technology and its languages to see what it can do. Not to use it just for its own kind of sake. It's good to understand when you look at the internet how it's connected and how it's works, or how the inside of your phone works. This will become more important for everyone.

GNYP

Otto Ford
Artist



Marta: If we move further into the process of painting, you're painting on computer to start with. Is there any special program you use or did you invent something for yourself; how does it work?

Otto Ford: Since the early nineties, I've used many different programs and processes. The magic of printing has always interested me. The fact that you can take something from a screen-based display and print it holds a certain magic. It's a super powerful medium and historically always has been.

Marta: You seem to combine a lot of various elements.

Otto Ford: Yeah. I went through a stage of electronic audio visual glitching; there are a lot of really cheesy glitch art out there, but some programs glitch things in quite interesting ways. But it's a complete amalgamation, there's no singular studio process. I just try my best to form an image and create something of a language whether that's a cutout from a glitched visual or a straight up photo.

Marta: If we think about digital painting and about the technology aspect of it, there are a lot of thoughts and ideas nowadays about artificial intelligence possible having a kind of creative agency. How do you relate to this? Is there any chance in your work that technology could have, let's say influence without you wanting it in it?

Otto Ford: This is a huge question. Obviously, AI is coming and in recent shows in the past couple of years, you can see it's going to be a huge aspect in the art field, but I think an important thing is we don't really know and understand it enough yet. The process of human interaction when creating this work is still very present and that's currently important.

Marta: You are as much present in your work as the artists who are using the traditional tools to make paintings.

Otto Ford: Yeah.

Marta: What about music, if we think about your titles there's a lot of music in your work.

Otto Ford: Definitely. *'Higher than the Sun'* for example is based on a Primal Scream song.

Marta: How do you work? Do you firstly think a lot and then all of a sudden there's an image on a computer, or are do you by trial and error become the image you want?

Otto Ford: It's just constant work, crafting to formulate this image. I think with anyone painting, there'll be many versions of it behind that I didn't feel were very good. There are many works that I just cast aside because I don't think they're any good. The process is very messy, like paint splatters, just folders within folders and archives.



Marta: A few artists told me, you cannot force art, you can only create a situation in which art happens. I don't know whether you agree with this – if yes, how would you combine such an idea when you work with technology and when the extend of control seems to be higher than when you keep your brush with paint in your hand?

Otto Ford: It's exactly the same. There is a zero difference in that. It's a strange space to be working in. It's heavily related to collage. As in collage, if you apply one photograph next to another photograph in a piece, there's a potential for energy happening there. If you apply another image behind that and then start to layer things up, the language, in a good or bad way starts to get more complex. It's not like throwing wet paint at a canvas but it contains its own inherent rawness.

Marta: Your paintings look extremely gestural.

Otto Ford: Exactly.

Marta: You do create but it would never be a haptic experience.

Otto Ford: I think these works provide their own kind of physicality to people who experience them in person, but also digitally. They are something different.

Marta: When we talked the other day, you said that contemporary painting was not developing anything new. You think that you could bring the painting in a new direction, which is extremely ambitious.

Otto Ford: It's important to have an energy to change things, be playful, have a blind ambition. To look in the direction of something and constantly question it. Creating works between the lines might cause us to find something new.

Marta: How do you intellectually conceptualize your work? The digital series we are now talking about, is extremely attractive and decorative.

Otto Ford: I just create work that if I went into an exhibition, I would want to see and experience, and hopefully they're open enough for all types of people to change their idea about what painting is and can become. I think an interesting point about this work is, it is decorative and beautiful to look at, but it has its flipside; for example it could quickly become political.

Marta: How can they become political?

Otto Ford: I think all artworks and so called 'art movements' are political. It just depends how much an artist wants to bring that to the foreground. If I used different data types and exposed more of the imagery I use, it could drastically change things.

Marta: It's also interesting how we think about decoration. Pollocks' drip paintings are highly decorative now; they are the perfect paintings for modern interior, while at the time of their making they were considered as something revolutionary. Decoration is an extremely interesting subject because it has always had certain connotations through the whole history as well as art history. And in a sense, there is the same to the politics, so-called very obvious political art because it can be used for so many things.

Otto Ford: I like collages by the 30s German-Polish artist Hannah Höch and most collage artists of this period. They would use collage to cut through to our subconscious. I think this type of work has more relevance to me as the process is the same, even if at the moment the end result is more painterly. When you look at a gestural painting, say in a museum, and then afterwards you walk down the street and look at an advertisement, the viscerally of the advert image is perhaps more powerful and direct. I think there are a lot of possibilities here. I'm also kind of just thinking out loud.



Marta: If we're thinking out loudly, where do you see your painting going?

Otto Ford: I'm so happy with this series; I think I will continue working with this process because these works really give me something, and hopefully lots of other people. It's something to continue. I think a lot of artists just do one thing for their whole life. I'm interested in lots of aspects of art and making, but if the image-making works conceptually, is individual enough, is aesthetically pleasing and is well made then that keeps me engaged. It's still early so I'm always thinking about how I can apply my studio techniques to new aspects of image-making. That's essentially what I'm interested in, the language and how do we change this language, improve it or taking a new direction.



Marta: You made a few paintings, related to other artists, one to Philip Guston and one to Picasso; is it a coincidence that you chose explicitly these two?

Otto Ford: No. I was just being playful with the first works and not really taking them too serious. The Guston work is a particular comment on me seeing his work in so many artists work. That's not a criticism of Guston; I love his work, but it is a criticism of I guess stylistic trends and fashion. Or a contemporary artist's struggle to do something different, which Guston obviously did. I'm kind of moving on from this and the works are becoming their own thing now, but I like that my work came out of a commentary on all the painting I was seeing being created everywhere. It still is.

Marta: It is not a kind of competition with Guston?

Otto Ford: No, but there is some of that in the title of it.

Marta: Guts of Guston.

Otto Ford: Exactly. I don't often see the radical move he made in artists careers today.

Marta: The same with Picasso which he completely jumped from one style into something completely different...

Otto Ford: But still maintains this thread. Big brave moments.

Marta: I heard someone saying about you that you are a great artist, but you are not a painter. It looks like people will always have this kind of strange relationship to your work because it's a painting but there is no traditional paint. You definitely have chosen to see yourself as a painter in this series.

Otto Ford: Definitely. Without a doubt, it is the language of painting. I don't see how you can see it any different really.