Digital Impressionism Essay, Research Paper

Digital Impressions

The nature of pictures has everything to do with technology. This is as true for hand prints on the walls of Lascaux as it is for a child’s fingerpainting or hi-tech computerized animations. Unlike singing, which uses innate tools and an invisible medium, people need external tools and visible media to make pictures. As new tools and techniques emerge, artists quickly start playing with them. The effect is often profound. The first mosaics, for example, were made from pebbles. Technology soon provided other ingredients – coloured bits of glass, precious metals, cut jewels, carved wood, glazed tiles – that could last ofr thousands of years. Occasionally whole artistic movements spring up. It must have been a revelation to travel hundreds of miles to Paris to get a glimpse of Seurat’s magical Grande Jatte but Pointillism and other forms of Impressionism represented a small step compared to the impact of photography, audio recording and transmission, cinema, and television.

And then came computers. Suddenly, it seems, the world looks very different when seen through digital eyes. Of course, people “draw” with computers, but this is not simply an extension of using a stick to scratch a picture in the sand on a beach, or a digital Etch A Sketch. People “paint” with computers. They “photograph” with computers. They “animate” with computers. Computers are emulating pencils and paper, brushes and canvas, cameras and film. Artists like to say that ideas matter more, but the impact of digital media on art is intense: It is now possible to shape and to share sounds, pictures, movies, sculptures, and more with a single tool. The brush is loaded not with paint but with bits, and the palette is as rich as the global internet. Photomontage has consequently grown up real fast.

The photomosaics in this book exemplify an evolutionary step into the digital domain. At the MIT Media Lab, Rob Silvers – then a graduate student – and a junior professor had complementary passions for pictures. A research project was launched with one of the world’s greatest photographic archives in a n effort to create a vast digital picture bank and to explore its possibilities. All the elements – image computers, a vast collection of dazzling oand inspiring pictures, and a diverse set of interests and energies in digital imaging – were in the air. In 1995, in a mid April late night flash, Rob began writing software to make mosaics out of the photographs. Photomosaics were born.