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## Connecting the dots of digital art

*Skullphone and other street artists use 1s and 0s to get people to think about the relationship between technology and their everyday views.*

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At a gallery in Echo Park, the walls are covered with shiny black paintings that have been painstakingly covered with tiny red, blue and green dots. Up close, they look like nothing more than evenly spaced flecks, but from a distance, they look remarkably like the digital billboards found on the Los Angeles skyline.

Clustered together, the trio of colors, which are also the ones used in printers and televisions, can combine to give the appearance of white, as in a painting of the Union 76 sign. In another painting, dots combine to make an orange sky, silhouetting mountains in a reflection of Topanga Canyon at sunset.

Thought the exhibit is now up at the Subliminal Projects Gallery on Sunset Boulevard, it's actually the work of street artist Skullphone, and it's the next phase in his examination of the evolving modern landscape.

"Technology is really changing our environment. These paintings are looking at what that could mean," Skullphone said.

Artists have always used the latest technology to create — from the invention of paper to today's software programs such as Photoshop and Illustrator. Graffiti and street artists, with their tradition of modifying spray cans or mixing wheat paste at home, are no exception.

Editing and creating on the computer has become widespread among street artists — particularly for those who do "sticker art" or plaster posters on walls. Take Shepard Fairey, who owns Subliminal Projects Gallery and became a household name for his red and blue "Hope" poster of Barack Obama.

"Clearly, that image was scanned," said Rex Bruce, director for the Los Angeles Center for Digital Art. The use of scanning — and other people's material — is becoming commonplace in street art, but Bruce doesn't believe scanning or using others' images detract from the resulting work being seen as a unique piece of art. (Others feel differently: Fairey was sued by the Associated Press for using one of its photographs in the Obama poster; the lawsuit is continuing.)

"All the images that are circulating around now, in almost any form, are being tinged and tainted by the presence of the digital," Bruce said. "It's always going to be there."

And it's not just photo images that are being "tinged."

Skullphone, who has so far succeeded in concealing his real name, was a relatively unknown street artist in 2008, stenciling his insignia with black paint onto billboards and concrete walls in Los Angeles County. Then he made a deal with Clear Channel to put that image — a skull holding a cellphone — on the company's newly approved digital billboards in L.A., which were creating a stir with "visual environment" activists.

While he was criticized for paying for the space (onlookers had hoped Skullphone had hacked into the electronic billboards), he says he was trying to get people to think about the relationship between technology and their everyday views.

Skullphone is also influenced by technology in the process of creating his work. He uses a computer to figure out how large and small each dot should be, and to help lay out the grid, before applying the paint by hand.

At the Los Angeles Center for Digital Art, artists are taking computer-assisted art even further. In 2004, the center put on one of the first cellphone art shows. The center use a wide-format printer and video monitors to display art, which can be sent in on digital files.

Bruce sees the interaction between technology and street art as bi-directional.

LED panels outside influenced Skullphone's street work, which he now has turned back into traditional painting and put in a gallery. Likewise, the center is taking digital art out of its gallery and putting it on the street.

In September, the center will present the second annual Digital Art L.A. expo. Officials there are in the process of getting a permit to close 5th Street between Main and Spring streets, where digital photography will be projected onto surrounding buildings.

"Once you get into using projectors, anything you can get into a computer ... becomes street art, be it digital and original or not," Bruce said. "Through emerging digital technology, new opportunities present themselves. Here, we have an opportunity to show a new version of street art."

But while LED billboards, Photoshop and projectors are changing the face of street art, those media may be only the beginning.

Artist Evan Roth started the Graffiti Research Lab online offering open-source ideas for how to use technology in graffiti; he also teaches a course at Parsons the New School for Design in New York on urban hacking and is at the forefront of digital graffiti.

For technologically minded graffiti artists, the Graffiti Research Lab has developed open-source LED "throwies" — tiny lights, powered by watch batteries and attached to magnets that can be thrown against steel walls, creating a glowing spatter effect that takes digital graffiti to a sparkling new level.

"I was in New York when graffiti art started to blow up, and I wanted to get involved," Roth said. "I wanted to do something new with the graffiti artists."

He began developing software that would track the movement of a graffiti artist's spray can. When translated onto a computer screen, the artist's strokes appear as a 3-D imagine — more like a sculpture than a flat picture. The layers of pain are shown in depth, revealing the nuanced way an artist's movements

form the strokes that make up the final image.

"People never see the graffiti written," he said. "The motion, to me, is interesting." Roth is now taking those visualizations and using a 3-D printer to make them into physical shapes.

Some of Roth's programs have had practical applications as well. He and his team developed an "eye-writer" that tracks eye movements and sprays paint accordingly.

Roth was inspired by the artist Tempt One, who was diagnosed in 2003 with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis — Lou Gehrig's disease — and now can move only his eyes to communicate. Roth hit L.A.'s streets projecting Tempt One's artwork on walls, with a live feed going back to the artist, painting from a hospital room.

"I deal with technology and graffiti a lot, but it doesn't really ever have a one-to-one function where people need it," Roth said. "He wouldn't be able to get out in the city without it."

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