

## The Problem with Titles

David Nixon invariably invents the titles for his intricately constructed works some time after their completion. He is occasionally tempted to leave his images with that most contradictory of titles, *Untitled*, but he rarely gives in. Instead, his titles sometimes describe a perceptual aspect of a work, such as in *Soft Geometry*, *Shimmer*, or *Unity*, but mostly they attempt to evoke a complex interweave of the artist's motivation for the work and his response to it on completion, with examples being *How the Earth Captures Clouds*, *Traffic Sounds*, and *Gateway*. To say that any artist has to wait until their work is finished to create the title probably feeds the not-uncommon perception that artists blunder about in the dark, working from pure intuition, in the time-honoured tradition of being as "stupid as a painter"—a vernacular description that Marcel Duchamp ironically substituted for the practice of metaphysics by image makers.<sup>1</sup>

Nixon notes his attempt to "seek titles that are anchored in the work, but suggest another, relevant dimension",<sup>2</sup> just as he acknowledges the problem with text and language in dealing in a mode of communication that is essentially ocular, beyond words. In reality, when a viewer is confronted with Nixon's works, the titles matter little because his approach is fundamentally opposed to the written and spoken forms that are seen as the defining symbolic system of representation, separating the human species from other animals.

Nevertheless, the arbitrary or cultural specificity of the symbolic order of language has always made visual artists suspicious of any descriptive or directive attempt to lock down the perceptual immediacy or metaphoric ambiguities inherent in non-mimetic visual representations. The subset of visual symbol systems that Nixon mostly works with, geometric visual patterns, not only claims a history that reaches back to the earliest known art by humans but also suggests a deep, primal universality, given its currency across many different cultural settings and time periods.

Nixon's claim to make visible the "finite boundaries of mutable consciousness"<sup>3</sup> can only be tested in operational terms by direct interaction with his etchings, drawings, relief prints, and lithographs. He is hardly alone in this renewed quest for perceptual, expressive, and aesthetic encounters with complex geometric patterns as particular or universal provocations of human consciousness.

The contemporary reigniting of interest in a deep or underlying human connection with a geometric universe is more manifestly evident in popular culture than in academic discourse. The exception is Barbara Stafford's ground-breaking theoretical contribution in 2007, *Echo Objects*, which brought into play the latest developments in neuroscience.<sup>4</sup> She demonstrates that the reoccurring complex patterns made by artists across time and cultures are products of the fundamental nature of the human brain and, in turn, contribute to the cultivation of its development. Admittedly, Nixon's reading of Stafford did not lead to a full embrace of her take on the cognitive work of images. This is because the term "cognition" does not evoke the consciousness we associate with the experience of deep

material and perceptual engagement with one of his complex etchings, for example.

A search on the Web will demonstrate the massive current popular interest in complex patterns and their meaning and production. A particular favourite is Cymatics, the patterns produced by tonal resonance on a metal plate. There are many YouTube videos showing the production of Cymatic patterns; one example is “Amazing Resonance Experiment”, which has amassed over 9.5 million views on YouTube since 2013 and opens with a quotation from Nikola Tesla: “If you want to find the secrets of the universe, think in terms of energy, frequency and vibration.”<sup>5</sup> Nigel Stanford’s more recent video “Cymatics: Science vs. Music” has exceeded more than 11.5 million views since it was posted in 2014.<sup>6</sup>

The Web is also overflowing with so-called Turing patterns, the regular but non-uniform patterns that appear in nature, most prominently as stripes or spots on animals or geometric patterns on sea shells. As we know from human fingerprint patterns, these are all generically similar but uniquely specific on close inspection. This contemporary interest in patterns generated in nature takes its name from Alan Turing, specifically because of an article he published in 1952 suggesting a chemical or biological mechanism for their creation.<sup>7</sup> Turing’s attempt to explain the persistence of geometric pattern formation in nature would probably have been overlooked if he had not gained his reputation as the Enigma code-breaker in the Second World War. His development of a machine that generates patterns and his speculation on the natural process of pattern generation position him in the long line of mathematical theorists from Fibonacci to Benoit Mandelbrot, who sought underlying rules, symmetric keys, or algorithms to explain or imitate the geometric regularity in nature. More recently, Turing has also been acknowledged as the progenitor of generative computer art.

However, the point of highlighting this spectrum of popular interest in theorising pattern making in nature is to highlight that the patterns and images that Nixon makes have only the most superficial connection with Cymatics, Turing patterns, fractals, Mandelbrot sets, or any other algorithmic computer production. Indeed, Nixon has no particular interest in any of these. Regardless of whatever connection his work has to the objective wonders of the hidden geometry of nature, chemistry, and mathematics, the symbolic system that Nixon uses to explore feeling and form is of an entirely different order. An artist’s investment in the sort of intensity, precision, labour, and invention required to create, control, and realise the complex images such as those that Nixon produces signifies a quest for pure subjectivity beyond any established forms of representation and certainly beyond language. This is why titles are hard to conjure forth for his works; language fails to match the dynamics of individual inner experience.

British doctor, poet, and cultural critic Raymond Tallis has recently noted that it is only when we deeply engage with art that we become fully conscious of the act of consciousness.<sup>8</sup> Fifty years ago, the American philosopher Susanne Langer made the same point more directly when she wrote that the “artist formulates that elusive

aspect of reality that is commonly taken to be amorphous and chaotic; that is, he [*sic*] objectifies the subjective realm, and the work that he produces articulates what is verbally ineffable—the logic of consciousness itself”.<sup>9</sup> There could be no better description for David Nixon’s work in this exhibition.

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<sup>1</sup> See Richard K. Merritt, "Intentions: Logical and Subversive . The Art of Marcel Duchamp, Concept Visualization, and Immersive Experience," *Tout-Fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal* 2, no. 5 (April 2003),

[http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue\\_5/articles/merritt/merritt1.html](http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue_5/articles/merritt/merritt1.html).

<sup>2</sup> David Nixon, correspondence with the author.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Maria Stafford, *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> "Amazing Resonance Experiment!" YouTube video, 3:38, posted by "brusspup", 6 June 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwJAgrUBF4w>.

<sup>6</sup> Nigel John Stanford, "Cymatics: Science vs. Music," YouTube video, 5:52, posted 12 November 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3oltpVa9fs>.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Turing, "The Chemical Basis of Morphogenesis," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 237, no. 641 (1952): 37–72.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Tallis and Julian Spalding, *Summers of Our Discontent: The Purpose of the Arts Today* (London: Wilmington Square Books, an imprint of Bitter Lemon Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Susanne Langer (writing in 1957) quoted in Donald Dryden, "Susanne Langer and William James: Art and Dynamics of the Stream of Consciousness," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 15, no. 4 (2001): 275.