

## Open World: Ian Williams and the virtual landscape

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Is all that we see or seem

But a dream within a dream?

-Edgar Allen Poe, *A dream within a dream*, 1849

Originally, making images was left to the *imagination* of the player. As we discussed his paintings in the studio recently, Ian Williams pointed out that modern computer games have changed dramatically. Discussing the atmosphere of dread that exists in violent modern computer games, he jested ‘your head could explode at any given moment.’ In early computer games, a more benign concept of play was central to the experience. Simple graphics would give the player clues about the narrative world they entered. This morphology of computer game aesthetics, particularly as they precipitate a shifting concept of play, is a driving question within Williams’ studio practice.

The phenomenon of the changing character of the ‘suspension of disbelief’ in the transformation of visual experience is nothing new to painters. A painter tries to understand their experience of their world, in a way that makes their investigation only ever crudely visible to others. Williams’ work draws on the artifice of computer game environments in a suitably painterly way, which allows the shifting sands to seem momentarily comprehensible. It is an approach that comes to fruition eloquently in this exhibition, *Open World*.

In an earlier project, Williams worked like an Impressionist, painting the environment of an open grassy field shown in a combat game. He sat, not with an easel in an actual paddock, but rather, in front of a large computer screen. Where an Impressionist is bound by the conditions of light and packs up their brushes as the sun goes down, Williams’ painting sessions ended instead when his avatar was shot dead in the game.

This situating of painting as an arena encircled by virtual combat has developed into different strategies in Williams’ more recent work. He now works back into the computer game’s more simple origins. He goes beyond the seductive artifice of the charged virtual environment, as the desire for greater critical engagement has prompted him to explore the glitches in the transfer of digital information on the computer screen. He uses brushstrokes in an analytical capacity to explore the problematic transfer of computer game imagery.

This appetite has also led Williams to introduce a “blur” element. This blur conceals aspects of an image, shielding the viewer from it. The smearing of paint like this has become a contested point in contemporary art scholarship. Gerhard Richter scholars debate whether the blur represents engagement with photography or some deeper registration of trauma. However, it is worth remembering that the initiates in some Aboriginal ceremonies have used the blur for millennia, blurring the sacred marks of pigment left on the body afterward, to dampen their iconographic power.

Williams’ projects remain true to old values in painting. He is a painter seeking to make sense of the senseless in modern life, or to make the sensible nonsensical. A private science is underway throughout his projects, producing

artwork through which we might better come to know ourselves and in this case, our games, a recalibrated initiation for the contemporary world.

Williams' investigation raises the question of whether the relationship that he observes is also true in the reverse situation. That is, if this play that is so often underwritten by violence (or at least competition) can inform a methodology for contemporary painting—can violence itself be a form of art? This unconscionable reversal is, in fact, the unbearable truth that Williams seeks to dampen for the viewer: a violent computer game environment has already constructed reality—continuously playable and 'Real'; *all* indistinguishable from a dream within a dream.

Game over.