

paul snell
codes and conventions



Opening Friday July 20th
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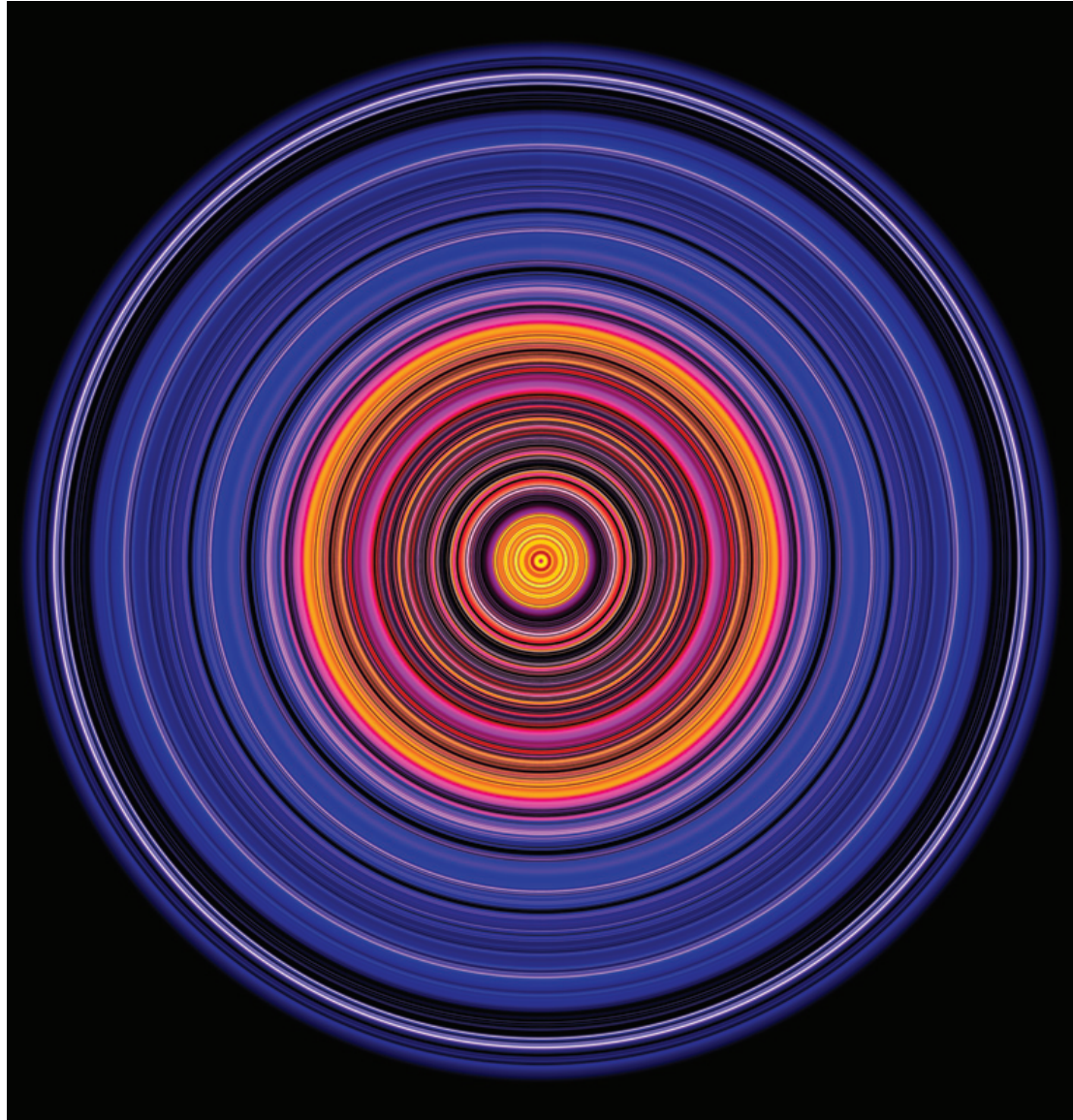
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To Be Precise; the New Work of Paul Snell

The biographer, Vasari, relates how on one occasion Pope Benedict XI wanted some paintings for the Basilica of St Peter's, and sent one of his courtiers to find out what sort of man Giotto was like. The courtier asked Giotto for a drawing which he could take back to the Pope. At this Giotto took a sheet of paper and a brush and with a twist of one hand drew such a perfect circle that it was a marvel to see. The courtier thought he was being ridiculed and took the drawing back to the Pope in great embarrassment. But when he explained how Giotto had drawn the circle, without the aid of a compass, the Pope and his more knowledgeable courtiers recognised instantly the superiority of Giotto's skill.¹

This established tale about Giotto and more significantly, art values and conventions, raises a number of interesting points when considered alongside the work of Paul Snell. Giotto's circle is valued due to the process by which it was made – freehand and hence signifying mastery beyond most competent craftspeople. Snell takes photographs and manipulates them using computer software. The original photograph provides a ground from which to devise iconic abstract images, its properties no longer clearly evident in the final work. His 'craft' and the wider context of this convention in contemporary art has moved on from value judgements associated with traditional technical skills. In the 21st century Art making has complexified infinitum.

It is not coincidental that Giotto chose to render a circle to present to the Pope, as the circle shape is a common geometrical signifier of the divine. Circles are a reoccurring device in Snell's work. Digital techniques enable a precision not attainable in the past through manual hand/eye techniques. This precision facilitates a disconnection from the human. Precision implies perfection and hence also divinity. The ease at which this perfection can be achieved today and the accessibility of such imagery has bought about a new interpretation, one much more connected. This interpretation is in the realm of culture not nature, as it is mechanised and constructed. To associate Snell's images with the divine alone is simplistic, there is something more.

It no longer seems possible to accept geometric form as either transcendental order, detached signifier, or as the basic gestalt of visual perception (as did Arnheim). We are launched instead into a structuralist search for the veiled signifiers that the geometric sign may yield.²

Snell's circles pulsate and strobe like the eye of the psychotic computer system HAL in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001 A Space Odyssey*. Expressionless and cold, recording and analysing every action, Snell's circles demonstrate the maximisation of efficiency and production. They are signifiers

of devices for surveillance and control. The new body of work contains a different direction, moving away from circles Snell is producing stripe compositions. Within the multitude of possible signifiers, these images are more grounded. They are abstract photography; significant again for their precision and specific materiality as digital prints mounted behind clear acrylic. Clear acrylic as a framing substance is not uncommon, but in the context of Snell's work, adhered directly to the print, it reiterates detached mechanical properties. It is a hard, rigid substance yet it is also fragile and transparent. One looks past it to the image underneath, as though at pixels through a computer screen. This is very different to analogue experience, it is not like looking through water or even a window; it is shallow yet deep and as a photographer Snell offers a techno remix of abstract painting's push-pull phenomenology.

The limitation and even absence of surface is a challenge for new media art. In video and photography it facilitates immersion purely through absence; one just falls through it. This has bought about a revival in 16th century pictorial perception, a type of recycled chiaroscuro.

Significantly this is not exclusively digital, as darkroom methodologies also offer a degree of visual precision distinct from the materiality of paint or other tactile mediums. The precision of dots per inch or fine grain negative film (substrate aside) is reflective of high-density illusionism. Its visual conventions have more to do with the intense accuracy of a Hans Holbein than the 'matter of fact' realism of a Noland or Stella. Its position in relation to abstraction is tenuous as it does not question perception but instead reinforces entrenched pictorial strategies.

One wonders what would be made of Giotto's mastery of the hand in a contemporary context. Would it still be marvelled upon or dismissed as mere 'craft'? Curiously, laypeople still value traditional skills that have not been taught in art schools for years. Perhaps this is due to a perceived degree of difficulty and mastery often associated with traditional skills, or a regard for the open display of 'workmanship'? Regardless, Paul Snell has moved a long way from this. His is a new type of skill re-presenting and re-interpreting ancient archetypal themes. No divine intervention required... be immersed in its hypnosis.

David Hawley
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