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Panmorphic Painting Paradise: The Art of Michael Merrill
Michael Merrill, *Panmorphic Painting*, Outremont Art Gallery,
Montreal. Nov. 24 – Dec. 18, 2011

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Du spirituel dans l'art
Number 96, June–October 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/67043ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)
1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Campbell, J. D. (2012). Review of [Panmorphic Painting Paradise: The Art of Michael Merrill / Michael Merrill, *Panmorphic Painting*, Outremont Art Gallery, Montreal. Nov. 24 – Dec. 18, 2011]. *ETC*,(96), 63–65.



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Michael Merrill, Panmorphic Painting,
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“But, after all, the aim of art is to create space — space that is not compromised by decoration or illustration, space within which the subjects of painting can live.”

— Frank Stella, *Working Space* (1986)

The paintings Merrill exhibited here were all from his extended *Panmorphic* (*pan* meaning all and *morph* meaning form) series.¹ This series occupied him from 1993 to 2002 (plus one sequel in 2011) and demonstrates his remarkable vision, technical virtuosity and mastery of scale, ranging from the miniature to the outsized. Merrill assembled an exhaustive archive of images for each subject, with locations ranging from within

his own studio to exterior views (usually but not exclusively of the downtown core) in Montreal and elsewhere. The archive contained images that would later comprise 360-degree views of the various sites, with the artist assuming shifting perspectives on each subject. The resultant spherical views on a two-dimensional surface yield a genuine epiphany and something like awe for the viewer. Merrill’s keen desire (perhaps obsession) to emplace the viewer within the image speaks volumes about his avowed purpose and obvious generosity as a visual artist. Unlike the ordinary perceptual situation in real life, the paintings value equally everything that comes under the painter’s purview: window, door, table, chair, even the rafters.

The series gestated in a host of questions about composition and thinking about how

to include the totality of a given space in a single painting. Merrill says:

“In a rectangle, the object closest to the centre of the composition seems to become the subject. As a painter, I am very aware that the spaces between things are as important to a painting as the things themselves. The “Arnolfini Wedding” is proof of that. The “Floor” paintings were about that. Painting the entire 360-degree space on a sphere seemed to solve that problem. The room became the subject. No object took precedence. Then I started to take photos of the entire space. Reassembling the photos became very interesting and opened up a non-literal reconstruction of the space.”

In these holistic constructs, Merrill creates a non-hierarchical relationship between objects and space. He is not after the best general view of the subject, as it were, but all the

appearances available upon it, and then collating them into something like a perspectival whole. This desire for expressive and perceptual plenitude is a hallmark of his whole body of work.

He is like a latter-day Carleton Watkins of the original plane. Nineteenth-century American photographer Carleton Watkins possessed the ability to photograph a subject from the viewpoint that allowed the most information to be revealed about its contents: “the best general view.” Of course, Merrill is a painter. But consider Watkins’ *Yosemite Valley from the Best General View* (1866), taken when he was working for the California Geological Survey. In this single image, he successfully seized upon what he considered were the essential apparitional details of Yosemite Valley. His standpoint in space is crucial and his placement of camera exacting so that canyon rim and open space beyond seem to dovetail and fuse. (Apparently, he added visual detail to the empty sky afterwards by adding clouds from a second negative.)

Now, Merrill’s purview is not Yosemite, or rather it is his own multiple Yosemites in the enviroing world. Since 1989, he has dedicated himself to developing a body of work that is an expansive, implied self-portrait. As he says: “The project has been an ongoing investigation of all that surrounds me from the skin outwards.”

In terms of the *Panmorphics*, Merrill the photographer positions his camera in the first instance so that he can capture as many perspectives as possible, in an almost phenomenological way, to use afterwards in painting. I mean, Edmund Husserl’s method of free eidetic variations, in which the philosopher can imaginatively vary any given concrete object’s different aspects. The series of variations are collated and overlap, and the aspect in which they overlap is the essence. Similarly, Merrill the painter is trying to give voice to the invariable and essential structure of the sundry objects that come under his purview.

In 1993, Merrill executed a series comprising five rooms painted on spheres. Each sphere depicted the entire surrounding space of a room (ceiling, floor and four walls). Arguably, this was the inception of the thought process that would lead to the paintings under discussion. Not only do they demonstrate the high level of technical control that characterizes his work, they prefigure the scale and ambition of all subsequent work. The spheroid paintings led to paintings on cast body parts of the artist’s head and a foot, in 1995. The



Michael Merrill, *Mansfield*. Art Mür, Montréal.

cast implies the human presence within the surrounding space. In 1996, the work moved out of the domestic and studio space and into the *Panmorphics* proper.

Merrill spent three months in Paris in 1996 (having been awarded a Paris studio), and attempted to transcend clichéd and iconic views of the city while at the same time inserting a more personal dimension within them. Moving outside of the studio necessitated the use of photography to create source material for the paintings. Using multiple photographs, it was possible to create a 360-degree panoramic image that he could work from.

Merrill says:

“These reassembled photographs started to become interesting in and of themselves, offering multiple possibilities for the invention of the complete space on a two dimensional surface. For example, the image could be assembled as a doughnut with the sky inside, or a sphere with the sky outside. The viewer is located within the image. The more complex the space is, the more variations and possibilities are available. This work has now included other artists’ studios, art galleries, landscapes and cityscapes with a recent interest in combining indoors and outdoors as well as unrelated spaces into a single image. Painting from this photographic source material allows for another level of interpretation.”

Subsequently, his paintings became more stylized, less naturalistic. As the work developed, there was an increasing development of a form of schematic layering influenced

by his contemporaneous drawings. (Think of Watkins adding the clouds to the sky in his Yosemite view.)

Merrill’s work is like a hectic collision between M.C. Escher, Wayne Thiebaud and Irish painter Robert Barker (whose panoramic paintings of Edinburgh were shown on a cylindrical surface and viewed from the inside, in London in 1792). Merrill, a painter, has profoundly updated a tradition that began soon after the introduction of the Daguerreotype in 1839, when photographers began assembling multiple images of a view into a single image. Digital photography of the late 20th century drastically simplified this assembly process, which is now known



Michael Merrill, *Expo*. Art Mür, Montréal.

as ‘image stitching.’ Well, Merrill’s image stitching is well nigh seamless in its mien. Merrill himself acknowledges being influenced by the work of Bill Vazan, Alain Paiement and Michael Miranda (the latter had “a wonderful photo piece inside a semi-sphere in a show at Stornaway Gallery”) before executing the *Panmorphics*.² Also the heavy and seductive gravitational pull of Expo ‘67 in Montreal left its mark upon him. As I looked at these paintings I was reminded that Lucid Dimensions has developed a spherical sensor configuration that weds multiple positional IR sensors with image data to provide tracking and identification of objects within a 360° × 360° FOV of the sensor. The prototype employs thirty 2M thermopile sensors from Dexter and Lucid Dimensions’ 2-D image sensor uses 30 thermopile sensors

mounted on a ring to detect IR energy. By calculating the positional angle of the source, the target tracking generated information can be used to automatically cue and pan, tilt, and zoom countermeasure or imaging systems. Now, transpose all this 3D spherical sensing to Michael Merrill’s advanced optic and the hand it rules and *voilà*, you have a *Panmorphic*. Merrill’s work has an unmistakable magic that is wholly and uniquely his own. (Think of his recent paintings of the Montreal Musée des beaux-arts interiors and exteriors.) His work demonstrates remarkable consistency, continuity, and a lively experimental sensibility that has kept his work well ahead of the curve. That work has always been about learning lessons from the past and figuring out what comes next. In a sense, he is after an immanent geometry found not only in the enviroing world – but in life itself (what philosopher Gilles Deleuze called the ‘plane of immanence’). Something like transcendence in the *here* and *now*.

Merrill has once again taken up the Panmorphic project and is executing true 3D sculptures. It is no surprise, given this painter’s phenomenal restlessness, that he should now be exploring the (formerly) painted subjects in 3D. In moving from two to three dimensions, he returns to his Spheroid sculptures and moves far beyond them, into the realms of engineering and architecture. Of course, Merrill is both a *painter’s painter* – and a painter at heart. No doubt he will soon return to his first, best destiny.

James D. Campbell

James D. Campbell is a writer and independent curator based in Montreal. He is the author of several books and catalogues on art and artists, and contributes regularly to art periodicals such as *ETC*, *BORDER CROSSING* and *CANADIAN ART*.

Notes

- ¹ The word Panmorphic was coined by John Klucinskas in conversation with the artist.
- ² Conversation with the artist, March 1, 2012.

Michael Merrill, *Blue London*, Art Mür, Montréal.

