JEROEN NELEMANS
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CATALOG ESSAYS:

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Jeroen Nelemans, born in the Netherlands, currently resides in Chicago. Nostalgia and its relationship with the digital image is a continuous thread in his work. Nelemans dissects the digital image as a physical object, by means of scanning the computer screen or simply photographing the backlit device. The new-layered image exposes the mechanism of display while creating new visual relationships to the source material.

His work has been exhibited at the MISSION gallery in Chicago; Aspect/Ratio gallery, Chicago; the Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia; the de la Cruz Collection Contemporary Space, Miami; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, Greece; Elmhurst Art Museum in Illinois; the Nice&Fit gallery, Berlin and the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, Grand Rapids.

His works has also been screened at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami; the Banff Center, Canada; Gallery 400, Chicago, as well as the Werkleitz Centre for Media Art, Halle, Germany; the Magmart International Video Art Festival, Napoli; the Dublin Electronic Arts Festival, Ireland and the Kortfilm festival, Copenhagen as well as the 25th Festival Les Instant Video in Marseille France.
Unrequited Love - 50 inch x 40 inch - archival inkjet print, laminated and mounted on dibond, wooden frame.

Unrequited Love contains portraits of men from his pre-digital past. Images gleaned from the internet have now been re-contextualized by means of digital and physical manipulation. These portraits transcend the subject’s identity through process and manipulation, divorcing the final artwork from it’s sources and connecting the viewer with the visceral, and emotional relationships we all have with unrequited love.
Treasure Trails - 50 inch x 40 inch - archival inkjet print, laminated and mounted on dibond, wooden frame.

Treasure Trails visualizes my identity in an abstract line composition, using my own fingerprint and body hair, both suitable as long-term markers of human identity. Human evolution made us the only hairless primates. The distribution of body hair may have become subject to sexual selection rather than survival. In Treasure Trails, body hairs are carefully placed against the grid creating a new design, while embracing my own obsession with body hair.
Nelemans takes on a different kind of icon in his sculptural works, using as his starting point Constantin Brancusi’s Bird in Space (1923). He investigates how physical space is translated into RGB subpixels by scanning a computer screen that projects an image of Brancusi’s work and manipulating the output into a sculptural photographic print. Bird As Space suggests the desire to translate the closed circuit into a physical object. Whereas Brancusi, inspired by Modernist principles, used vectors to suggest the freedom of the bird’s flight, Nelemans instead encloses the sculptural work within an acrylic box effectively caging the bird.

– Lisa Sutcliffe, Curator of Photography and Media Arts at the Milwaukee Art Museum.
Swipes - 40” x 29” - archival inkjet print, laminated and mounted on dibond, wooden frame.

For his Swipe series, Nelemans examines how personal gestures dictate what we might desire from a device. Using a translucent gelatin to highlight RGB color filters, he swipes his finger across a digital screen capturing a lasting record of his marks. He flattens the resulting image and removes any trace of identifying fingerprint to create a universal abstraction. Digital media, unlike analog materials, is valued for precision and regularity often producing sharp, focused images. Here, Nelemans subverts its intended use to create a flattened kaleidoscopic abstraction that still traces the history of his own hand on the surface of the screen. This physical swipe gesture suggests that our primal imperatives persist even with access to the most advanced devices.

– Lisa Sutcliffe, Curator of Photography and Media Arts at the Milwaukee Art Museum.
Scapes in RGB - 32” x 40” x 2” - custom made frame, backlit film.

For his Scapes in RGB, Nelemans displays images of iconic Sugimoto Seascapes on his iPad and then carefully places water droplets on the screen so that they complement and integrate with the Sugimoto composition below. The water droplets act as magnifying lenses, revealing through refraction the red/green/blue (RGB) patterns of the iPad’s liquid crystal display. Nelemans then takes a photograph of the device’s display, and prints the image files as transparencies, ultimately affixing them to light boxes. The resulting images retain the quietness of the Sugimoto works but with a subtle animation formed by the patterned drops. As Nelemans explains, “Whereas Sugimoto talks about water and air as life forms, I highlight the life form of the digital image.”

- Karen Irvine, Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago.
Jeroen Nelemans renews the tradition of Dutch landscape painting through digital technologies. In a series of eight photographs presented on lightboxes, titled The more I see the less I grasp, Nelemans considers nature as a constructed fantasy. Here, nature is a stage set, complete with lighting effects and a structural framework. To create these layered images, Nelemans photographed each lightboxes’ innards, and using green-screen technology during post-production, he inserted photographs of sunlight streaming through a forest’s canopy. Finally, the commingled image of the lightboxes’ inner bulbs and the sunny forest are presented on the lightbox, illuminated from within. In this presentation, Nelemans reveals that a picturesque image, so often taken for granted as ‘natural,’ cannot be separated from the mechanism of its creation.

- Jason Foumberg, artcritic/writer.
Homage to the Cube - 9 “x 9 “ - light box, polarizing filters, Cellophane and Plexiglas

For Homage to the Cube Nelemans takes artist, teacher, poet, and theoretician Josef Albers as inspiration. Sometimes the colors seem to overlap, or they appear translucent. Like Albers, Nelemans keeps the underlying shape, in his case a cube, and overall composition basically the same throughout his series. But instead of being pigments, Nelemans’s colors are produced by light waves, which reveal various hues depending on the amount and molecular makeup of the clear material the light is projected through. To this end, Nelemans uses a sophisticated LED panel as a backdrop, one that uses a grid system to distribute light evenly across its surface, similar to the iPad’s liquid crystal display. He then creates the illusion of a cube in a decidedly low-tech way, by sandwiching pieces of layered cellophane between two polarizing filters; their colors change depending on the angle at which they are placed.

- Karen Irvine, Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago.
To Leave an Incomplete Image of Oneself takes Vermeer’s images of domestic interior scenes and marries them with collected images of light sources and light baffling from museums and cultural institutions that control and light these Dutch 17th Century paintings themselves. The images are a mix of images I took while visiting these museums and others were taken with screenshots from the Google Art Project, which is an online platform through which the public can access high-resolution images of the interiors of international museums.
Through photographs and sculpture, Susan Giles and Jeroen Nelemans investigate individual gestures within the digital realm. Each artist considers how visual experience or memory can take physical form. As the name of the exhibition suggests, both artists explore the intersection of the personal and the collective that ultimately reflects a desire for individual expression within a homogenized platform.

With a wealth of parallel experiences available at our fingertips, what distinguishes individual encounters? Interested in iconic monuments and how they embody national or official histories, Susan Giles seeks to discern in what ways personal narratives might intersect or diverge. In large scale time-lapse photographs printed to human scale, she records her subjects as they describe their memories of visiting historic monuments. The marks they leave behind with the movement of their hands trace an inherently personal memory of the site that may differ from fact. These gestures produce a sculptural light-writing that hints at a connection between human neural pathways and digital platforms.

Giles additionally incorporates Google Earth to source the working material for her related sculptures. The corporate crowd-sourced platform layers parallel individual experiences into a communal archive, which she then 3D-prints. The resulting sculptures become physical talismans or micro-monuments that illustrate the collective desire to record a memory or experience of place. Giles also highlights how the digital platform freezes time through shadows, that while fleeting in real time, become a permanent part of the structure of the recorded site in these online images.

What do we want from these platforms and how do we coexist with new technology? For hisSwipe series, Nelemans examines how personal gestures dictate what we might desire from a device. Using a translucent gelatin to highlight RGB color filters, he swipes his finger across a digital screen capturing a lasting record of his marks. He flattens the resulting image and removes any trace of identifying fingerprint to create a universal abstraction. Digital media, unlike analog materials, is valued for precision and regularity often producing sharp, focused images. Here, Nelemans subverts its intended use to create a flattened kaleidoscopic abstraction that still traces the history of his own hand on the surface of the screen. This physical swipe gesture suggests that our primal imperatives persist even with access to the most advanced devices.

Nelemans takes on a different kind of icon in his sculptural works, using as his starting point Constantin Brancusi’s Bird in Space (1923). He investigates how physical space is translated into RGB subpixels by scanning a computer screen that projects an image of Brancusi’s work and manipulating the output into a sculptural photographic print. Bird As Space suggests the desire to translate the closed circuit into a physical object. Whereas Brancusi, inspired by Modernist principles, used vectors to suggest the freedom of the bird’s flight, Nelemans instead encloses the sculptural work within an acrylic box effectively caging the bird.

Together these works communicate a shared desire for human connection in a digital platform. Could the insistence on personal gesture fight the advance of digital homogeneity? Despite the near infinite archives available online we continue to tell stories that give voice to our individual experiences. Although digital platforms have attempted to standardize human output the works in this show suggest the continued need for human inspiration and vision, with all of its flaws and idiosyncrasies.

– Lisa Sutcliffe, Curator of Photography and Media Arts at the Milwaukee Art Museum
Recurrent Color by Karen Irvine

In the exhibition Backlit, light emanates from display vehicles such as computers and light boxes to produce arresting and ephemeral light effects that manifest themselves as colorful images. Dutch artist Jeroen Nelemans (b. 1974) reveals the complexity of perception and the mystery of color as he provocatively deconstructs the technologies that usually deliver them.

Nelemans’s series Scapes in RGB (2013) is inspired by Seascapes, a seminal body of work that Hiroshi Sugimoto (Japanese, b. 1948) began in 1980 in which he captures the sea and sky using black-and-white film. Although Sugimoto follows a tight compositional formula by always having the horizon line bisect the image, the images still vary greatly in atmosphere and mood due to changing weather conditions and exposure times. For his Scapes in RGB, Nelemans displays images of iconic Sugimoto Seascapes on his iPad and then carefully places water droplets on the screen so that they complement and integrate with the Sugimoto composition below. The water droplets act as magnifying lenses, revealing through refraction the red/green/blue (RGB) patterns of the iPad’s liquid crystal display. Nelemans then takes a photograph of the device’s display, and prints the image files as transparencies, ultimately affixing them to light boxes. The resulting images retain the quietness of the Sugimoto works but with a subtle animation formed by the patterned drops.

Sugimoto has said that his primary subject is time, and he has spoken poetically about the basic elements of water and air in his Seascapes: “Water and air. So very commonplace are these substances, they hardly attract attention—and yet they vouchsafe our very existence.” By disclosing the colors hidden in his tablet’s display of a black-and-white image, Nelemans punctures any illusion of equity between an analogue (or physical) print and its digital copy, which is teeming with a different sort of potential based on its highly malleable digital form. As Nelemans explains, “Whereas Sugimoto talks about water and air as life forms, I highlight the life form of the digital image.”
For his other project on view, Homage to the Cube (2014), Nelemans takes artist, teacher, poet, and theoretician Josef Albers (American, b. Germany, 1888–1976) as inspiration. Over a period of twenty-five years beginning in 1949, Albers produced more than a thousand works based on mathematically determined compositions of nesting squares. Albers used these abstract compositions to explore how colors interact, specifically what happens when various colors are combined in close proximity to one another. Although the paintings vary in size, their compositions are all the same, and certain squares appear to float, advance, or recede in space, depending on the placements of the individual colors within the overall scheme. Sometimes the colors seem to overlap, or they appear translucent. Like Albers, Nelemans keeps the underlying shape, in his case a cube, and overall composition basically the same throughout his series. But instead of being pigments, Nelemans’s colors are produced by light waves, which reveal various hues depending on the amount and molecular makeup of the clear material the light is projected through. To this end, Nelemans uses a sophisticated LED panel as a backdrop, one that uses a grid system to distribute light evenly across its surface, similar to the iPad’s liquid crystal display. He then creates the illusion of a cube in a decidedly low-tech way, by sandwiching pieces of layered cellophane between two polarizing filters; their colors change depending on the angle at which they are placed. Congruently, the color compositions in these works also change as the viewer’s position changes. Akin to M. C. Escher (Dutch, 1898–1972), who created an impossible cube—a drawing of a cube that could never exist in real life—Nelemans produces an illusion based on how the human eye interprets two-dimensional pictures as three-dimensional. The image appears to be constantly shifting, making clear the subjectivity of our stance and the delicate nature of the interactions between light and color.

In Homage to the Cube and Scapes in RGB, and in all photography for that matter, images are made with technology, but they depend on elemental principles of physics and simple interactions between materials and light. By investigating and deconstructing basic materials, some that produce light and others that alter it, Nelemans deals in the enduring mysteries of photography, color, and perception, and deftly conjures the magic they make possible.

—Karen Irvine
Curator and Associate Director, Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago