

PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE PRACTICE OF CONTEMPORARY PAINTING. A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT. Photography in the Practice of Contemporary Painting. A Pedagogical Perspective. Photography is a technological medium that suffers continuous evolution. From its earliest developments to the various types of recent printing, the photographic image has become an avatar of the world. Since images are irreversibly intertwined with human activity, their usage becomes an increasingly frequent practice in the area of traditional creative techniques. This article discusses some examples of this usage in the context of contemporary painting studios in higher education. Photography is accessed by young students and the foray into photographic documentation is now an inevitable tool. The way students use it as an intermediary can be disruptive to their learning process, as long as the role of photography in painting practice is not fully comprehended. There are different ways of integrating photography into the practice of contemporary painting. The present article addresses conceptual aspects, presents several particular situations and launches some perspectives for better understanding these practices. Photography is a tool, not an end, but what happens when these terms juxtapose or are taken for granted? What kind of painting results out of the practical process “contaminated” by photography? However, if technology is properly and timely integrated in the practice of painting, one can no longer talk about a “contamination”, but rather about a conscious process able to generate quality painting.

Keywords: *painting, photography, hyper-realism, photorealism, contemporary art, art teaching, art pedagogy, art courses, artist, contemporary painters*

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1. Historiographical survey

Photography had and still has a fast development once the technical solutions became more and more simple and effective in rendering a projection. The processes of image transposition are based on photosensitive materials, hence the adaptation of the Greek term *photo-graphia* to this medium that will change the course of the history of visual arts. In a very short period of time, the camera would function “as an extension of the eye in capturing the world”.¹ 60 years have passed since the first photo was taken on paper until film rolls were available on the market, at which point the multiplication of images entered a straight line towards a total liberalization of access to image. As a double effect, photography will not only spread as a new technology, but it will also open the way to the moving image, i.e. to film.

The immediacy of the photographic experience would profoundly influence many areas where the visual was part of knowledge methodologies. This new way “to see” quickly turns into a tool. Scientific visual documentation, journalistic documentation, recording of immovable sites, mapping, archaeology are some of the fields that have adopted photography as a working tool. The imagined elements designed according to the subject, the personal approaches practiced so far in painting, drawing and engraving are now confronted with the power of realism. Film easily captures what brushes and charcoal cannot: a kind of accuracy that would profoundly change the way images are perceived.

Through the camera, vision was taken out of its physiological circuit and mechanized by an apparatus. In the end, photography manages to dislocate the real and replace it into a different context. It involves a complex and refined process, that gradually succeeded (and culminated today) in dominating image creation. Photography and later digital photography involved a complete reshaping of image typology and graphical needs in terms of their reproduction, becoming a science of the image.

2. Photorealism and the mutation of perception

The clarity and pragmatism of the photographic image entered the territory of painting. Starting from the 50s–60s access to images became more and more available. Glossy magazines were edited, then larger and more complex posters,

¹ “As an extension of the eye reaching out into the world”. See Ansel Adams, *The Camera*, The Ansel Adams Photography Series 1 (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2020), 9.

billboards, adds. At the same time, television and cinema were made on an ever-larger scale, all based on painted scenery. In this context, it was only a matter of time until the emergence of photorealism or hyper-realism, which began towards the end of the 60s in US and speeded quite quickly in Europe. Simultaneously, it was technically doubled by the invention of acrylic or vinyl colours. The appearance of these polymer paints confers a special texture to the painting, a smooth, clear, semi-opaque pellicle, enhanced by the technical advantage of the fast drying of the colours.

1970s American painting, along with the abstractionists and conceptualists, embrace photography as a starting point in creating a painted figurative image. Painters are seduced not so much by mimesis, as by the solid structure of the photographic composition and by the particular light of photography. Its rendering in painting requires a precise technique and a discipline of applying successive colour layers. However, photorealists do not aim at making a perfect copy after a photograph. The mere technical displacement of a subject from one medium to another was not an end in itself. The concept built around photography's passing into the spectrum of painting, corresponds exactly to Ansel Adams's definition for photography as "departures from reality".² Hyper-realistic paintings start from photography as a concretely expressed reality, rendered unambiguously and in details. Just as the lens simultaneously captures the planimetry of a subject, so the hyper-painting focuses on a plenary view of an image.

This new type of painting pushes the technical limits of a traditional medium that previously seemed limited in capturing reality. In the old day, the ability to mimetically render an image required a number of special painterly skills: impeccable drawing, a well-controlled colour palette, flawless linear and chromatic perspective practiced long enough to counteract lens aberrations. The texture of these paintings is also specific to a photographic image, with no modelling paste, no reliefs, no obvious brushwork or graphics that betray the technique. Everything is smooth, fluid and focused on form and light. This luminosity typical of photography is what painting borrows from photographic techniques. Through exposure and successive development, brightness is controlled to achieve different tonal intensities in the photograph. The light and the way it disperses into the image, becomes what we call photographic light, that is, a peculiar brightness that seems artificial. Photographic light is distinguished from natural light, either by being flat or by being strongly directed or solarized. All these light effects are brought into the "apparatus" of the painting. Painting has the ability to simulate materiality, and with photorealistic painting, materiality becomes essential to picture perfection.

² "... departures from reality"; Ansel Adams, *The Camera*, 1.

The extraordinary abilities of hyper-realist painters are mesmerizing. The texture of the painting is concrete, the stake being the illusion that what we are looking at is a photograph. The conceptual finality of hyper-realistic painting is not mimesis of the real, but the mimicry of a universe already technically manipulated. Photography was assimilated to painting through a reality that became *hyper-reality*, that is, an augmentation of a palpable reality. Basically, painting increases the sensation of realness present in photography by texturing details that are hard to see with the naked eye or hard to understand. Photorealistic painting renders the subject by making visible what is hardly perceptible but one knows it is there: pores, the thickness of the hairs, the iridescence of the iris, scars, dermatological spots, hematomas, wrinkles, folds, threads, cavities, asymmetries and so on. Chuck Close, Robert Bechtle, Richard Esste, Audrey Flack, Ralph Goings, Richard Phillips, Denis Peterson are just a few of the hyper-realist painters who became well-known in the US in the early 70s (Fig. 1, Fig. 2).

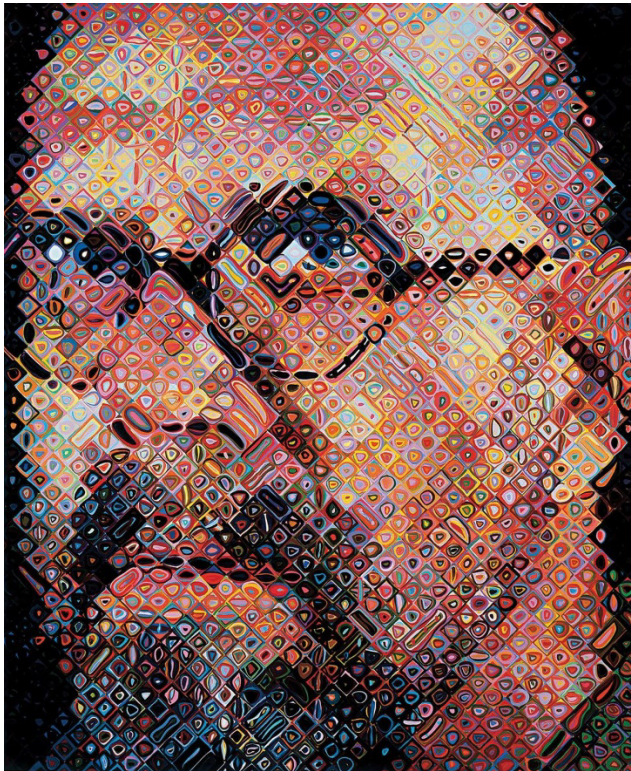


Fig. 1. Chuck Close, *Self-portrait*, 2000 (photo: PRNewsFoto/Corcoran Gallery of Art/AP Images, Encyclopædia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Chuck-Close/images-videos#/media/1/122091/163024>)



Fig. 2. Robert Bechtle, '61 Pontiac (1968–1969), oil on canvas, 151.8 x 214 cm (photo: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Bechtle#/media/File:Robert_Bechtle,_%E2%80%9961_Pontiac,_1968%E2%80%9369.jpg)

Art theory places the phenomenon of hyper-realistic painting in the *phatic images*³ zone: images that involuntarily capture the gaze and attention. *The glissando* between the *photo-image* and the *hand-made image* in the painting technique becomes the focus of attention. Images possessing this phatic function have an addictive power. The viewer feels suspended in the field of perception, trying to fully understand what he sees, while simultaneously anticipating the certainty that completes the cognitive process. The fine oscillation between questioning and certainty confers the eye-holding power to an image. In the case of the painting, this confiscation of the eye creates suspense around the identity of the image, followed by anticipation of the certainty that it is in fact a painting. Re-editing the real is basically the main achievement of hyper-realistic art. The image not only has the ability to irresistibly dominate attention, but this attention turns into a need to “visually” touch the painted subject. Hyper-reality works in two ways, once by reproducing reality and then by reconverting it into a tactile, sensory, immersive iconography. These apparently seductive qualities are anchored both in painting and hyper-realistic sculpture, as shown by the works of John de Andrea, Ron Mueck or the installations of Olafur Eliasson that simulates the experience of a real phenomenon (*Mist, Sunrise*).

³ Barbara Maria Stafford, and Horst Bredekamp, “One step beyond Hyperrealism”, *TATE ETC*, no. 5 (Autumn 2005), <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-5-autumn-2005/one-step-beyond>.

The strong sensation of real is given by the valences with which ordinary objects are invested in different contexts. The viewing experience becomes more intense. In both painting and sculpture, objects visibly removed from the everyday environment are engaged in a different special reality, created through accumulations of detailed information, delivered simultaneously and at the same intensity. The perception of reality is not disguised, but simply enhanced.

3. Beyond de real. How come the hyper-realism is still hype?

Young generations are not only *digital natives*, but they actually form their aesthetic education starting mainly from images. LCD screens and HD formats have raised the standard of image accuracy in everything related to the visual industry. Even Pixar or Disney productions changed not so much the type of animation, but the accuracy of textures, materiality, graininess, fineness of shapes and colours, depth of shadows, basically everything that enhances spatiality and three-dimensionality. Cinematic 3D imaging was just one step away. It is beyond any doubt that new generations of artists grow up receiving much more from children's imagery than previous generations did. The same goes for video game graphics. Virtual raids are increasingly specific and amazingly accurate. It is not surprising that the VR world is exponentially developing nowadays, not only on the *gaming side* but also in cinematography, documentaries, interactive animation, immersive installations.

Why this growing need to simulate and reproduce real things as faithfully as possible? For the gaze to be retained by an image as long as possible, information is needed.⁴ A realistic image provides much more information than a synthetic one. Besides, the simulacrum is an appealing concept. Not so much by extraordinary mimicry, but by recontextualizing the real. The overlapping of plans arouses the desire to foray into a world that otherwise seems inaccessible. What catalyses attention is the overlapping of two realities: one of what we know about reality but don't necessarily see and one of what we see but didn't necessarily know it existed. The fact that I am sitting in a room, and, at the same time, I transpose myself to the African savanna through VR, where I can even "touch" a lion's mane, consists in an overlap of reality planes – one in which I physically exist and another to which I have access through visual sensors.

⁴ Marta Calbi, Hava Aldouby, Ori Gersht, Nunzio Langiulli, Vittorio Gallese, and Maria Alessandra Umiltà, "Haptic Aesthetics and Bodily Properties of Ori Gersht's Digital Art: A Behavioral and Eye-Tracking Study", *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (November 7, 2019), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02520/full>.

Hyper-realistic painting adheres to the same concept of gaining access to a reality otherwise difficult to enter and understand. The augmentation of a detail makes the real go beyond its conventional limits and produce a revelation. This new version of revealed reality captures and satisfies our senses simultaneously. The reality we just have access to is amazingly accurate and this aspect becomes a stake, a stake aiming to produce surprise and to trigger curiosity to visually and cognitively encompass a new state of the familiar. Once scaled up, this familiar reality goes beyond the everyday life and becomes a new reality, a new version of the subject. Hyper-awareness is what characterizes a photorealistic image. By clarifying hyper-definition, painting adds value to this experience. We may not fully understand why painting has the power to bring a photographic image to “more than” photography, but we can admit that, in addition to the visual stimulus derived from the image, painting confers *surface* to the subject. The painting displays a layer loaded with physical matter, which triggers tactile sensory needs,⁵ thus entering the territory of the haptic image.⁶

“The overproduction of too many or too much”⁷ as Barbara Stafford calls it, the hyper-real, has as its final effect a laconic reduction of the object to its pellicle that can be touched, but which never needs to be touched to become a real object. Just stimulating and simulating touch is enough. This way, the subject of the painting becomes an object.

In the 1960s and 1970s, photography made it possible for painters to conquer a territory that for a long time was beyond their power of expression. Nowadays, the new media technologies, VR and augmented reality give a new dimension to the desire to appropriate reality. The banality of a common object or place is redefined once it is transposed into a hyper-real context. The premise is reality, and the goal is to overcome it, by mastering it in the field of artistic vision.

In such a framework, photography does not replace painting, but merely gives a subject to it. The practice of faithfully painting after a photograph in the 1960s has been replaced over the last 10 years by image processing on the computer and, more recently, through mobile applications. A mobile application operates on the same trajectory of intervening over the image surface, redefining its subject by enhancing certain details. Basically, one manipulates details and characteristics of the subject in the image by acting on the stylistic structure. Hyper-realism manifests itself on a fine line between mimesis and imaginary. Mimesis is the gear that sets the creative process in motion in the case of photorealistic painting,

⁵ Calbi, Aldouby, Gersht, Langiulli, Gallese, and Umiltà, “Haptic Aesthetics”.

⁶ Calbi, Aldouby, Gersht, Langiulli, Gallese, and Umiltà, “Haptic Aesthetics”.

⁷ “The overproduction of too many or too much”. See Stafford, and Bredekamp, “One step beyond Hyperrealism”.

but as long as the author remains captive to this mechanization in the act of painting, the image becomes flat and empty of meaning. Mimesis remains stuck in the narrative, which drastically limits the painting's value.

4. Photography in the practice of recent painting

In short, history counts already more than 100 years since painters have resorted to photography as a means of creating a painting. One could think of Edgar Degas or Gustav Caillebotte, of the painting of Salvador Dali or Maurice Utrillo. The latter frequently used postcards to paint his frenetic urban landscapes.⁸ Painters captured what the experience of the real offered, but the structure of the image and the various rendition details, which memory often alters or eliminates, were present in the photograph as a compositional *fixus*.

As image multiplication became simpler and more accessible, photography entangled more and more with painting. It evolved into a visual element in painting, not by imitation, but through its physical integration into the inner layers of the painting.

For example, the artist Arnulf Rainer intervenes with gestures over the photograph. His art consists of this specific dialogue between gestures and surfaces, between the static frame of the photograph and the expressive, involuntary gesture of the hand. Overlapping these two layers was a way of manipulating the perception of the image. This mergence between photography and painting, in which photography works as a base for the latter will continue and further develop once image multiplication with typographic ink (and later with digital printing) appears. Photography is also a "primer" that offers more. It offers a working framework in which the pictorial gesture has a privileged role of enhancing the image (Fig. 3).

Gottfried Helnwein was an artist assimilated to Viennese expressionism, who explored macabre themes marked by war trauma, in which the figure of a child is often used in contexts not connected to childhood.⁹ In his works, children are a symbol for fragility and resistance at the same time. The artist used large size print photos, over which he intervened with layers of acrylic painting, precisely in order to emphasize the visual impact and to accentuate the dramatic effect of children's portraits. For Helnwein, the photo is a constitutive layer, an intrinsic part of the final result, and not just a medium that experimentally substitutes classical painting techniques (Fig. 4).

⁸ Francis Carco, *Utrillo* (București: Ed. Meridiane, 1970), 50.

⁹ *Gottfried Helnwein* (St. Petersburg: The State Russian Museum, 1997), 345.

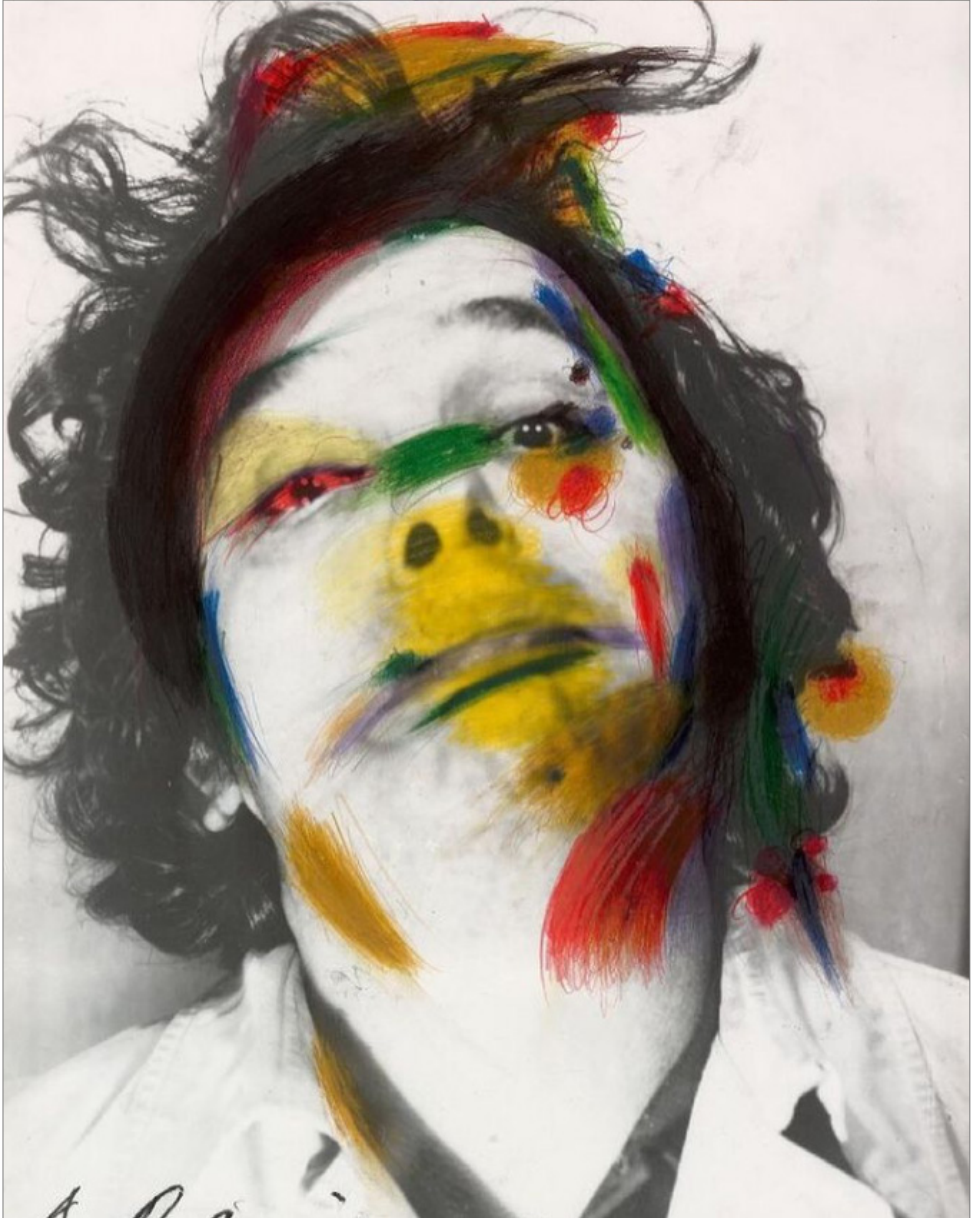


Fig. 3. Arnulf Rainer, *Face Farces (Face Coloring)*, 1969, colored pencil, oil chalk over photography, 57 x 43 cm (photo: <https://www.instagram.com/p/COH6kwsBYRW/>)



Fig. 4. Gottfried Helnwein, *Untitled (Payton 2)*, 2005, 160 x 106 cm / 62 x 41", oil and acrylic on canvas (photo: https://www.instagram.com/p/CtjtnOPAfR_/)

Contemporary art encompasses multiple overlapping and experimental techniques. Any image resulting from a rigorous artistic discourse and a solid plastic approach lays within the terms of contemporary art.¹⁰ The mixture of photography and painting is not a new phenomenon, but it continues to fascinate mature and young contemporary artists alike.

A review of the contemporary painting produced in Cluj-Napoca during the last decade, in the framework of the University of Art, reveals a consistent production of paintings that include, technically or conceptually, photography. Mircea Suci, an exponent of recent Cluj painting, uses a personal method of transposing the photograph onto the canvas. In his case one could think of a variation of the monotype, but in the end the specific way the photo is integrated on the canvas is less important. What is relevant is the discourse assumed by the author.¹¹ For Suci, the photograph receives the plasticity of the painting precisely because that specific painterly gesture (the trace of the brush, the wiping of the finger on the surface of the canvas) brings the image into the privileged circle of the painting. Alone, the photograph attracts through its message framed by contrasts, lines and expression, but within the painting it brings that haptic element, which automatically raises the photograph to the status of a unique object.

Photos used as an obvious iconographic substratum belong to two categories: photos with iconic figures or poses, or simply random borrowings from the online environment, and personal photos from one's own staging. The fact that the photo is not randomly extracted from the vast internet but is processed and created by the author confers a certain note of assumption and originality in this dual mechanism of constituting a painting. In this sense, Juhos Sandor's painting is a good example (Fig. 5). Juhos composes his own images, his own "assembles". Using exclusively personal photographs, the photo undergoes computer processing where the image is calibrated to the desired colour density and texture. This procedure is rational, the stages of editing are clear and predetermined. The resulting image is then transposed into the painting medium. The British artist Justin Mortimer has a similar process, his compositions being dependent on a pre-editable phase in the virtual editing of different photographs (Fig. 6).

¹⁰ Szu-Yen Lin, "Art and Interpretation" *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://iep.utm.edu/art-and-interpretation>.

¹¹ Mircea Suci, "Arhivez niște stări pe care le traversez", interviewed by Silviu Pădurariu, *Dilema Veche*, 880, February 18–24, 2021, <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/la-zi-in-cultura/artezivuale/arhivez-niste-stari-pe-care-le-traversez-632084.html>.



Fig. 5. Juhos Sandor, *Glaze and Pom-pom*, oil on canvas 82 x 80.2 cm
(photo: artist's personal gallery)



Fig. 6. Portrait of Justin Mortimer in his studio
(photo: <https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/justin-mortimer/>)

The scenic composition assembled by the artist, then photographed and “exported” in oil on canvas, it abundantly found in the imagination of Teodora Axente, a painter from Sibiu. Her images abound in contrasts between textures and reflections, so that photography fixes the scenography, but also the precious materiality that constitute an end in itself in Teodora’s painting. So, in Mortimer’s and Axente’s cases the photograph is the element that keeps the composition together and the authors are using it as a means of visual fixation.

Ana Maria Micu is another Romanian painter who uses a lot of photographic and video documentation in her works. Photography is a clear point of reference in her work, but as she approaches the subject through painting, she surpasses the photo and renders the depths and contrasts of the image. She uses photography mostly in order to control the visual simultaneity of the image and refines through painting the subtle contrasts and textures that the lens flattens (Fig. 7; Fig. 8).



Fig. 7. Ana Maria Micu, preparatory photograph (photo: artist’s personal gallery)

Fig. 8. Ana Maria Micu, *of uncertainty. ... Children who perceive*, 2019, oil on linen, 100 x 95 cm (photo: artist’s personal gallery)

Gerhard Richter is already a classic name in postmodern and contemporary painting. Early in his career, when he was searching for meaning in his painting, he managed to bring a new element to the way figurative painting delivered a message. Even if a certain trans-continental line can be drawn between Richter’s searches and what Jack Whitten was doing with the “erasing” gesture – *cancelling*

the painted image, Richter remains the established European author of this manner of painting. Richter used press images, at first black and white, but also personal photographs later on. Whether the photos belonged to him or not has little consequence, as long as the painted image was validated by the act of painting. The artist never built an intimate relationship with the photograph he used, but merely viewed it as a snapshot of someone else's history.¹² Richter "manipulates" these histories by bringing that snapshot into the context of painting, subjecting them to the painter's decisions (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Gerhard Richter, *Hunting Party* (1966), at the Art Institute of Chicago, in 2023, (photo: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerhard_Richter#/media/File:Hunting_Party,_1966,_Gerhard_Richter_at_AIC_2023.jpeg)

¹² Robert Storr, *Interviste sull'arte* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2019), 328.

It is clear that the cinematic eye of the camera has repositioned our way of understanding and operating with the image, which becomes “an enlargement of experience”.¹³ But when we talk about painting, part of the mental visualization of a composition, is transferred to new technologies. Thinking, premeditation and reflection have a clearer antechamber from the moment the device took over the part of the “making off” a project, and the time frame between premeditation and mental projection is shortened. The artist is now able to directly access a base of images that becomes part of the creative process.

Film once again reshaped the way we relate to composition and its dynamics. The painting, however, implies a fragmented image, a discontinuous continuity, a sequential narrative that works through visual analogy. That’s why the photograph, the frame, the snapshot, the screenshot, is much closer to the specific thinking of a painter. The crystal-image that Deleuze was talking about when he theorized about the cinema and image,¹⁴ is also valid for the painter who develops a series of works. The fragment becomes an independent piece. Piece no. 1, track no. 2 and so on – they are all works that reflect a continuous idea and a coherent whole at a conceptual level. However, descriptive image is no longer a unanimous desire in contemporary art. Conceptual art and minimalism have stripped away the surplus one by one. Composition in contemporary art no longer primarily means a reference to reality, painting is no longer required to be an extension of reality.

Even if recent art can encompass any possible artistic direction, there is an ethos of what visually dominates in art at a certain point. Nowadays, this dominant no longer seems to be a composition loaded with human bodies perfectly positioned in perspective, with clear gestures and intentions, described in a conformist palette. The monumental and figurative groups that narrate a scene, that compose a scenography have been taken over in more scenographic artistic media (performing arts, film, video). Contemporary painting is created rather intuitively and is very much based on the profile of its creator and not on an artistic collective or trend. Even if certain visual matrices are easily recognizable in contemporary painting, the materiality of the painting has gained increasing importance, leaving representation values as a secondary issue. In this context, the fragment, the frame, the detail become much more desirable in a personal painting approach, while the instant photo becomes more relevant in the practice of painting. But when one says “relevant”, what does one really intent?

¹³ Ansel Adams, *The Negative*. The Ansel Adams Photography Series 2 (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2020), 2.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Tratative* (Cluj-Napoca: Idea Design & Print, 2005), 49.

5. Pedagogical perspectives on the use of photographs in painting practice

As we have seen, the desire to capture reality on canvas is not something new, but it remains essentially the eternal combustion of representation. The affective attachment towards image is formed in an early stage. When a young student enters the environment of artistic high studies, this already existent attachment is (ideally) educated and professionalized. The craving for creating a painting that would “resemble” or be in perfect synonymy with reality is educated in university through conceptualizing the artistic approach, through deeply understanding the desire to render an image in a certain way. Basically, the selection process and critical spirit come into play. This stage engages analytical thinking, synthesis and abstraction, in order that the artistic concept (if it exists at all) should be later revealed through the works. Overcoming this desideratum of imitation implies that it is first transformed or deconstructed, thus the student reaching a maturation of the gaze and the ability to understand a subject. In a nutshell, this process means discovering one’s own gaze and a specific and personal way of synthesizing and rendering visual information. When the only goal is mimesis, the intellectual processes referred to above are non-existent. Precisely this whole process is essential to comprehending the subject of an image and to perceive photography as a means, and not as a purpose.

Photographic art itself requires a good understanding of the visual language and compositional rigors, but especially of the conceptual implications, well-articulated by Cartier Bresson:

To me photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event, as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression (...). A balance must be established between these two worlds – the one inside us and the one outside us. As the result of a constant reciprocal process, both these worlds come to from a single one. And it is this world that we must communicate. But this takes care only of the content of the picture. For me, content cannot be separated from form. By form, I mean a rigorous organization of the interplay of surfaces, lines and values. It is in this organization alone that our conceptions and emotions become concrete and communicable. In photography, visual organization can stem only from a developed instinct.¹⁵

Highlighting these aspects, I will further refer to my experience of working in the studio with undergraduate students in various courses dedicating to the exploration of painting. During the last 10 years, the presence of photography

¹⁵ Ansel Adams, *The Camera*, 110.

in painting studios has increasingly strengthened. Liberalization of information and access to images is now almost unlimited and discretionary used. Not only access to image databases, but also the possibility to create a photographic image at any time and through a multitude of digital methods is obviously an advantage of today's students (Fig. 10; Fig. 11).

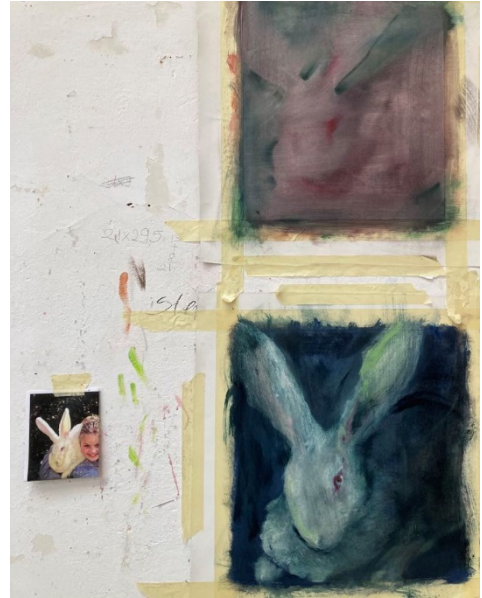


Fig. 10. Painting studio during practice courses, Painting Department, University of Art and Design of Cluj-Napoca (photo: A. Mureșan)

Fig. 11. Painting studio during practice courses, Painting Department, University of Art and Design of Cluj-Napoca (photo: A. Mureșan)

If before obtaining an image involved material and time consumption, today the process is compressed in a few seconds. This being the case, creating or obtaining an image is no longer perceived as a disruptive moment during creation. Practically, the reality of young artists is constantly doubled by digital images. The photo itself doesn't even have to be physically present, a mobile phone is enough.

However, the problem does not lie in the fact that access to images is non-discriminatory and unfiltered, for a teacher can easily direct a student to look for something specific, to search the correct information. From a pedagogical point of view, the problem arises when the student does not know how to relate

to the selected image. There are thousands of photographs very well focused on a specific subject, but once “translated” into the medium of painting they are disowned, devoid of content. There is a possibility that this situation stems from the fact that students of recent years no longer have a conscious relationship with photography. They are, paradoxically, no longer sensitive to this medium. Their constant exposure to images, either photos or videos, contradictorily brings along a certain desensitization to the artistic valences of photography. First and for-most, photography is present in students’ preoccupations as a channel of communication. The photographic image is a vector in communication and its role is reduced to a simple hyphen and not to a “container” with complicated meanings. The purpose of photography in the artistic studio is strictly utilitarian nowadays. I will not dwell upon here onto the debate concerning the differences between artistic photography and anything beyond this definition. Suffice is to say that in painting studios, the use of photography is a reality already integrated into the artistic process nowadays. This is not completely new, nevertheless the novelty stands in the particularity of new technologies and gadget applications (Fig. 12; Fig. 13).



Fig. 12. Painting studio during practice courses, Painting Department, University of Art and Design of Cluj-Napoca (photo: A. Mureșan)

Fig. 13. Painting studio during practice courses, Painting Department, University of Art and Design of Cluj-Napoca (photo: A. Mureșan)

6. Conclusions - The photograph/image in the painting studios

In the case of established artists, a photograph (be it personal or borrowed) that works as a starting point for a painting is integrated by the painter into his own artistic endeavour. A photograph might be accidental, but it is never accidental that the artist uses it.

The photographic image printed on the canvas or mounted on a panel confers a certain texture and style to the painting and leads to a specific working method, in which the paint layer complements the photograph underneath. There is also a transferring technique of the photographic image onto a support, most often a specially prepared canvas, while the transfer itself gives new substance, new consistency and texture to the surface of the painting. The transfer itself can be controlled so that the image can be antiquated or incompletely transposed on canvas, but the most important aspect is that it does not mark the limit of the photo on the fabric. Therefore, it seems to have been printed directly on the fibre of the canvas. The transfer allows even much finer manipulation of the photo in the painting process. The interventions can be very subtle, so fine and well contoured on the photographic image, that the simulation of an oil painting can be complete. In the case of some of the artists already mentioned, this is assumed and integrated at the level of theoretical discourse. One can speak of a mixed technique that gives less importance to the method itself, since the real priority is acquiring an evocative image.

During their university training in painting, students frequently use various techniques of transposing photographs into their works. Photography is constantly used in the studios as a reference for composition, colour and most often for drawing. While before 2010 access to images, as well as the creation of an image were still mediated by a digital camera, with smartphones photography has become extremely accessible. Images multiply daily and the online platforms where they can be downloaded are becoming more and more complex.

Nevertheless, unlimited access to photography has a paradoxical limitation as a consequence. The available visual information is so vast that a simple quest that is not specific enough would lead to a range of images selected by an algorithm based on previous searches, on the most frequent requested ones or on network HITS. Thus, as long as students do not master a clear search track, a certain defined feature of the image, or if they do not diversify the specifications enough, the images they would finally use as the basis for a future composition might have multiple flaws. The most frequent mistake emerges when the resulted image does not reflect the student's personal discourse on the project. Topics such as the copyright debate or how a photo is captured from the internet to be used in an artistic project are not of my concern here. What I want to point out is that, in

spite of the unlimited access to images, the result of collecting photos from the internet is often typologically repetitive or inferior in terms of symbolic and aesthetic content, regardless of the author's intentions (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14. Painting studio during practice courses, Painting Department, University of Art and Design of Cluj-Napoca (photo: A. Mureșan)

Notwithstanding the infinite possibilities to access digital images, students are encouraged to create their own image base through personal staging, through personal photographic documentation or by using a personal selection of still frames relevant for the subject explored in the painting. A photograph randomly taken from the internet, without being the outcome of a Dadaist exercise at most, will inevitably reduce the quality of the artistic result.

Debates on how photography is used in art courses during the completion of an assignments have been increasingly addressed within the university environment for the last five or six years. Photography has become omnipresent in students' painting studios, either in the form of prints on photographic paper (that is, artistic photography) or merely as documentary images of varied content, having mostly a journalistic and observational character. In the space of the painting studio, photographs function more and more as a visual landmark, which gradually replaced the draft. What previously was recorded rather by drawing notation, small coloured sketches or compositional variations by hand, has now been replaced by photography – an image able to provide much more details on the subject matter. Compared to a sketch, either hand-made or digital, this method may seem excessive, but one needs to acknowledge that preliminary documentation no longer necessarily involves a sketchbook. Detailed visual information is already present in the photograph, where from the young artist extracts as much as he needs, complying or not with that information.

Before this unlimited access to images, the preparatory hand sketch for a subject required a somewhat longer grasping of the theme, line morphology and technique. This inner dialogue still remains valid in contemporary painting, but it is no longer externalized through gesture, as it resumes to merely observing the photographed image and selecting from it what the artist finds relevant. The process of correlating an image with the future painted work is now mediated by photography. For the younger generations, this seems more than natural, given that they frequently use images as *pinned post*. Nowadays, if something needs to be remembered (a figure, a quote, a cover, a recipe, a code), it is usually pinpointed through a photograph. Even more so, an idea that needs to materialize in a painting will firstly be recorded in pixels and only later developed in a different medium. Moreover, if a photograph plays the role of a sketch, it will also bear the changes that a sketch carries in order to better define the iconography of the future painting. Thus, photography becomes an intermediary stage in the creation of an artistic project. While an evolving sketch comprises various subsequent changes to the image, meant to offer clear technical coordinates for the final painting, a photograph can serve as a compositional and chromatic structure to be further processed. On the computer or even on a smart phone, certain image effects or features can be exacerbated or eliminated. Moreover, starting from a photo, a virtual image can be created, which will be later translated into painting techniques. Such an approach is now largely widespread in both mural and easel painting.

However, a major shortcoming encountered these days in painting classes is the students' increasing temptation to use photos on their phones as a substitute for the model or the still life from the course topic. Albeit the human figure is present in the studio, totally available to students' eyes, it often occurs that the observation

exercise does not focus on the model in the vicinity, but on its photograph, taken in the same pose. I find it to be a strange way to do the study, that essentially cancels the intellectual process required for studying a subject and reduces it to merely copying a photograph. In two out of three such cases, the motivation of the students is that various details (folds, joints, facial details or texture details) are not visible to the naked eye. Basically, they resort to photography as a kind of telescopic lens, which is supposed to bring clarity to the forms. Nonetheless, the result of such an approach produces a dislocation of the fragment from the whole, a deformation of the perspective and the total loss of depth. In addition, the entire process of forming perception and plastic articulation is compromised (Fig. 15, Fig. 16).



Fig. 15. Painting studio during practice courses, Painting Department, University of Art and Design of Cluj-Napoca (photo: A. Mureșan)

Fig. 16. Painting studio during practice courses, Painting Department, University of Art and Design of Cluj-Napoca (photo: A. Mureșan)

As long as the role of photography in easel painting is clearly defined and assumed as part of the conceptual construct of the painting, photography is justifiably incorporated into the DNA of the creation process. In these parameters, it becomes a means able to facilitate the configuration of the final painted image

or the thematic ensemble. As long as the use of photography in practical courses or in the sphere of individual creation is not a simple mimetic process, the fact that it can replace a hand sketch does not lower the quality of the painting. Yet, mimetism without a reflexive critical process reduces the painting to a meaningless image. Even if certain technical qualities are well preserved, they become irrelevant in the context of the copy which retains a purely formal attachment to the photograph. The simple transition of an image from one medium (photography) to another (painting) is not enough to ensure sufficient aesthetic and conceptual quality to the final painting.

A common mistake consists in the way drawing and perspective are taken from the photograph, often out of proportion and distorted. The “design” of the lens and the optical analyser of the camera work differently compared to the human eye.¹⁶ The human visual organ has a unique perception of reality and three-dimensionality. The apprehension of proportions and of the distances between shapes is often contorted when copying the content of a photo without making the correction specific to human perception. The chromatic characteristics are also different in a photograph, therefore their simple taking over in painting, without changing the palette also leads to a distortion of perspective and to a fading of volumes and depths. If these chromatic effects are not realized consciously in the composition, they will have a disruptive effect to the painting as a whole. Thus, painting needs to go beyond the chromatic and drawing terms of photography, through solid knowledge of studying drawing and colour.

It remains to be seen whether the AI-generated image will be able to overcome this hurdle of sterile mimetism. So far, it has been proven that humans respond with brain activity when faced with a work of art, an endeavour that encloses a human intervention, a processing resulting in a form of visual expression.¹⁷ This does not happen when looking at a nature landscape or at a real, concrete narrative image that is defined by the mere communication of an instance and not by processing it through a critical filter. Precisely this filtering process and what remains after this creative decantation is what makes a work of art, respectively a painting and constitutes the delimitation between an artwork and any other type of image. The recent emergence of GPT chat-generated images depends on the specification of the request (prompt) and on the accessed database. However, the conceptual or morphological manipulation of images undergoes critical reasoning in the case of generated images as well. Studies confirm that

¹⁶ Ansel Adams, *The Camera*, 110.

¹⁷ Rogala Jacek, Beata Bajno, and Andrzej Wróbel: “A hidden message: Decoding artistic intent”, *PsyCh Journal* 9, no. 4 (August 2020): 507–512, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7497000/>.

an HD image causes more brain activity than a blurry image¹⁸. Responsible for such an impact are the characteristics of the image and the degree of perceiving a certain type of artistic manipulation of the image.

“Artwork” produced by AI has only begun its journey in our visual universe and future studies will have to establish how this type of image will be perceived and appreciated. It remains to be seen how and in what way AI images will replace photography in art studios practice as well. Not in the least, the future will tell if AI images have a direct input into painting made in traditional techniques or whether traditional techniques will be still used at all.

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¹⁸ Jacek, Bajno, and Wróbel, “A hidden message”.