

# Art **in** Print



January – February 2019  
Volume 8, Number 5

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*On the Cover:* Sonya Rapoport, detail of *Anasazi Series, Panel 1-A, Page 1 of 12* (1977), Prismacolor and pencil on found pre-printed perforated continuous-feed computer printout paper. Courtesy Estate of Sonya Rapoport.

*This Page:* Alex Dodge, detail of *Whisper in my ear and tell me softly* (2018), oil on linen. Courtesy the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, NY.

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Art in Print is supported in part  
by awards from the  
National Endowment for the Arts.  
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# Sampling Ourselves: A Conversation with Alex Dodge

By Kate McQuillen



Alex Dodge, *The flower of the human heart (Ono no Komachi)* (2018), oil on linen, 36 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, NY.

Alex Dodge makes paintings with a combination of digital design tools, generative algorithms and simple print-making techniques, most frequently stencils. Dodge is fascinated by the way we construct and manipulate digital data, and by the power of that data to then manipulate our perceptions. In making his work he moves back and forth between sophisticated software systems and computer-assisted laser cutters, on the one hand, and the gloppy materiality of paint on the other. A new body of work is based on a simple but mysterious premise—wrapped objects and how we intuit what lies within.

The paintings in Dodge's recent exhibition at Klaus von Nichtssagend in New York pictured shapes draped with pat-

terned fabrics and tied with ribbons that bear poems in English, Russian, Chinese and Japanese (all only partly legible). The "objects" inside these wrappers are generated digitally, as is the fabric and its 2D pattern (stripes, polka dots, florals, etc.), and the text-laden ribbon. This digital file is then used to laser-cut chipboard stencils. Using oil paint and an extra-hard squeegee, Dodge uses the stencils to recreate the design on canvas. The depth of the chipboard creates a raised edge of oil paint high enough to cast shadows.

Dodge is interested in how our minds make sense of the physical world, and how this is reflected in the virtual realities we build. The distorted patterns are clues to the hidden shape within, purposefully incomplete, offering just enough detail to

keep us wondering. Like the swelling and tapering parallel lines in the engravings of Claude Mellan (1598–1688), the disruption of otherwise regular marks provides a sense of form and volume. The more the patterns warp or collide, the more fully we can imagine the absent third dimension. Bundling familiar objects in cloth and string was a Surrealist tactic for making the familiar strange (Man Ray's blanketed sewing machine, *l'Enigma d'Isadore Ducasse* [1920/1973] is one well-known example). And Dodge, who is married to the designer Satoko Nakagawa and has spent a good deal of time in Japan, would also have been aware of the Japanese custom of wrapping gifts in *furoshiki* fabrics.

The optics of Dodge's paintings—the candy-store colors and hard-cut edges of

the paint—are dazzling, while the poems are tender and haunting. One ribbon quotes a ninth-century Japanese *waka* poem by Ono no Komachi:

*How invisibly  
it changes color in this world  
the flower of the human heart.*

Another comes from the fictional religious texts invented by Kurt Vonnegut for his 1963 satirical novel *Cat's Cradle*:

*We will touch our feet, yes,  
Yes, for all we're worth,  
And we will love each other, yes,  
Yes, like we love our Mother Earth.*

The presence of these two texts, one sincere, the other ostensibly parodic, suggests a sly sense of humor on the part of the artist.

Dodge's draped forms sit centrally on a blank background with no horizon line in sight. The only indication of a horizontal plane supporting them is a curious squish of paint around their bottom edges, creating a kind of oozing base on which the object sits. Belonging neither to the fabric wrap nor to the body beneath, these blobs seem to represent an unresolved part of the equation. Simultaneously technological, tender and funny, Dodge's works consider how artists and machines might combine forces in a new, mutually generated world of visual experience.

The following conversation took place on 3 October 2018 at Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, New York, NY:

**Kate McQuillen** Could you give us a description of how these are made?

**Alex Dodge** Most of the ideas for the work start with fairly crude ink drawings—just brush on paper, very, very quick. I sketch very quickly to understand what I might want the painting to be. That is then taken into a digital 3D-modeling world where something [a real-world object] might be 3D scanned, or might be modeled digitally, and a physics-simulated [virtual] piece of fabric is draped on top. Within this simulated, virtual computer world situations are set up, and I have no way of knowing exactly how they're going to turn out, what the outcomes will be. That's one of the most exciting parts—you have an idea of what you start with, one idea that you're thinking of, and then



**Above:** Alex Dodge, *The flower of the human heart (Ono no Komachi)* (2018), oil on linen, 36 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, NY. **Below:** Alex Dodge, *The rim of a cloud (Anna Akhmatova)* (2018), oil on linen, 52 x 100 inches. Courtesy the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, NY.

something entirely different comes out.

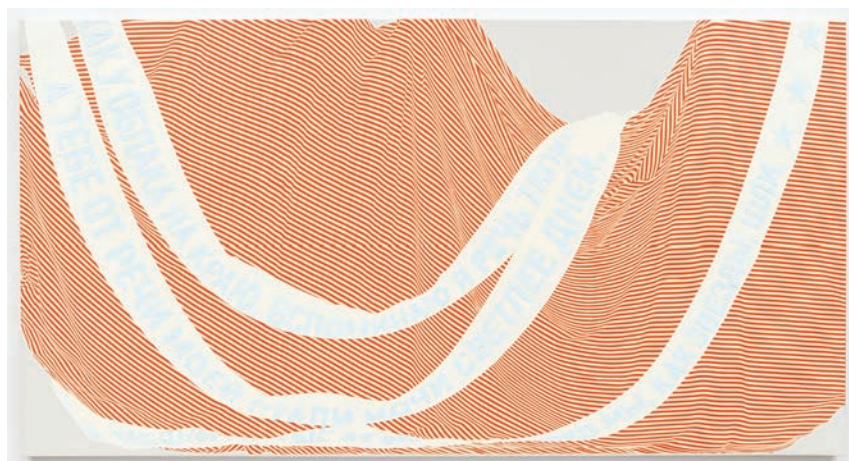
This situational setup is really fulfilling, and also something that you can iterate very, very quickly. If one idea doesn't work, you haven't invested so much—you haven't built an entire movie set to do it—you can just shelve it and maybe come back to it. Generally the simulation is built using a physics engine of some sort. A lot of the technology that's made for video game development is ideal, because I can set something up and watch it in more-or-less real time, then press pause, change an element, and watch the show happen again. The model can be manipulated in different ways: I'll apply patterns to the fabrics that have been simulated and draped on the object; gravity can be increased or reduced (which is not something you can necessarily do in the real world). There are a lot of things that are

fun to be able to change in that virtual world.

Ultimately, I create a model that will be rendered as a 2D image, from which I create laser-cut stencils. Those stencils are applied to canvas and I scrape lots and lots of oil paint through them. They're open stencils, so there are limitations that wouldn't be there in screenprinting. But the benefit that is that you have this relief and tactility, which is really important.

**KM** Because the paint is so thick, there is a slight shadow that helps ground the piece.

**AD** I do a daily studio journal and often I'll just ask simple questions like, "What is a stencil? What does it mean to be able to use it?" I remember writing that and realizing that using a stencil enabled certain





Alex Dodge, *Whisper in my ear and tell me softly* (2018), oil on linen, 96 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, NY.

qualities and image-making that nothing else could: stencils allow for complexity and accuracy. But they're very quick, and that's a powerful thing. You can do these amazingly complex, accurately combined patterns and images, and do them in a very immediate way.

Around that same time I was watching an NHK documentary (NHK is basically the Japanese PBS) about *katazome*, which is a traditional Japanese textile dyeing method. It's like batik, where there's a resist and you put it to a dye, but they cre-

ate the resist with these intricately hand-cut *washi* paper stencils. They scrape rice paste through them and let that dry on the textile, then add it to the dye. While I was watching these women scrape this viscous rice paste through the stencil it dawned on me, that's the way to do it.

I've created my own system of squeegees and things; it feels somewhat like screenprinting, but much more crude. Watching the process of *katazome*, with these intricate hand-cut patterns, made the connection for me to start doing the

work in this way. But I don't hand cut things; I use a laser cutter. An artist's process has to find itself within the limits that they live in, and for me that limited resource is time. The ability to do things relatively quickly is important.

**KM** Examining the paintings, the complete lack of brushstrokes becomes apparent. That's something I've always loved about creating a print: your fingertips don't really get involved until you're peeling the paper back.

**AD** There is something really wonderful about it. The hand is so involved in printmaking, but it's not always immediately apparent. Which is the case in these paintings too.

**KM** In the paintings we see an exterior wrapping, and then beneath that there is a form that we can't see, but that you're indicating.

**AD** That's something that I found intriguing on a purely perceptual level: the way that our brain is able to decode deformation patterns as a separate way of describing space, aside from value changes, light-and-dark, or linear descriptions. However, there is also a subtext, which is this idea that repeated pattern could be a stand-in or metaphor for digital systems at large, in the way that a digital system is this agnostic, logical system that is overlaid on top of experience. The smaller the pattern is, the higher level of fidelity it has, as with sample rates in audio recording or the resolution of a pixel-based image. I thought that this is a nice parallel to talk about this shroud that is draped over our experience.

**KM** I have read that human forms are underneath. Is that always the case?

**AD** No, not always. A lot of the work, especially earlier, used human forms, 3D-scanned but crudely; we didn't need high fidelity because they were going to be covered up. But in other works the objects underneath are modeled digitally to resemble objects in everyday life. Also, some of the structures are "inflated"—so they're still in the language of textiles, but they don't have anything inside them at all.

I feel that they are incredibly expressive forms. They have a figure-ness to them. And they have a power to evoke emotion, imagining what might be beneath, and



Alex Dodge, study for *The Flag Today (Light) I* (2018), acrylic, collage, graphite and UV varnish on paper, 20 x 30 inches. Courtesy the artist and Klaus von Nichtsagend Gallery, NY.

also the nature of how the cloth billows and folds. There are a lot of connections to academic painting and draftsmanship in terms of rendering with cloth and drapery.

**KM** Discussing these as metaphor for virtuality: there are things we experience in the virtual that have this uncanny sense of reality; that is really what draws us to virtual reality . . . there's something familiar about it but then there's something that is slightly off.

**AD** Very much. When I was first figuring out how to think about this work, I did imply ground planes, like an actual horizon line. It just didn't work, and I couldn't figure out why. And I realized that it was shifting it back into this historical space of landscape painting. It reduced the objectness that I was really interested in. Now, these blank grounds in the paintings are treated like paper would be treated in drawing or printmaking. But they're also virtual voids, and although there is the more gestural, oozing stuff that's applied to the ground, the objects

are still floating in this in-between place between sculpture and painting, where they retain that objectness. But it's a virtual kind of objectness.

**KM** The squishing paint is one of my favorite elements. It feels like a part that doesn't compute, easing its way out.

**AD** I think that's right. Early on these emerged intuitively, like small accents that were added around the edges of forms. I couldn't figure out why they were necessary, but without them the work feels extremely rigid and cold. There needed to be something that both grounded it on a formal level, and also in terms of aspects of experience that cannot be understood in pure geometries. It needed something more manic that could be thought of as the viscera of life, of the inescapable qualities of being human, of being biological, of a wet and muddy world. But there is humor there too. "Don't let this get too serious" is something I've learned through getting older. You have to have a sense of humor, especially these days.

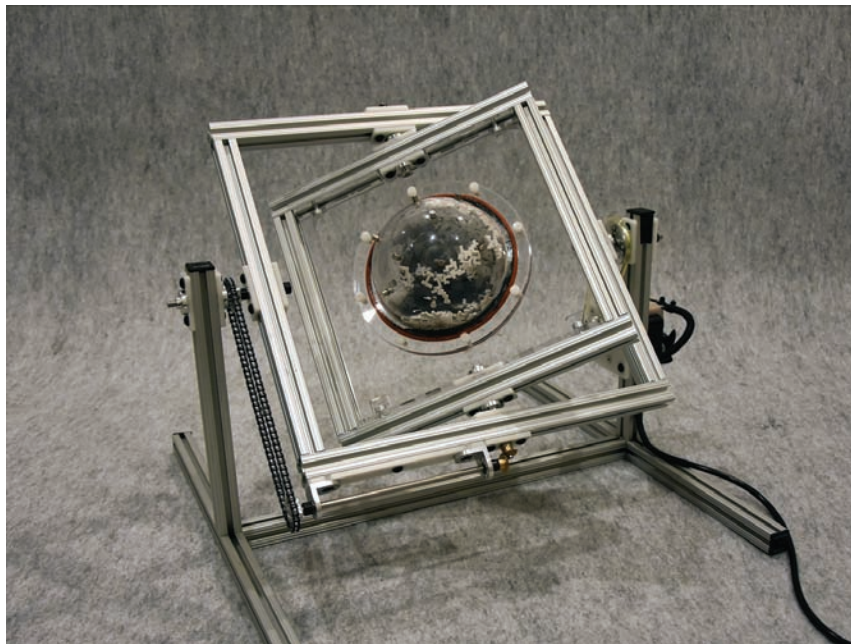
**KM** In addition, there are the wrapped banners of text.

**AD** Text is really another pattern. It's a pattern that we're all pretty familiar with, and one that we can decode fairly readily, spatially, when it wraps and is distorted. It has the ability to do things that pattern on its own can't. It has these inescapable meanings and information that can be combined.

**KM** The texts are beautiful—some of them give me goosebumps—but then you balance that out with treatments that are graphic and straightforward. Your use of color is flagrant and loud, so the paintings walk this delicate line between all of these different types of feelings.

**AD** I hope so. It's a tough place to walk, because I don't want them to come off as too ironic or to imply an insincerity in the language. A lot of it is very intimate, coming from love poems and other one-on-one dialogues.

**KM** I want to ask you a bit about the 3D



**Above:** Alex Dodge, *Functional Models of Self Realization (sammai-gumi) 4* (2014), graphite and earth pigment on synthetic paper, 20 x 26 inches. Courtesy the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, NY. **Below:** Alex Dodge, *Morpheme Reactor MKII* (2016), aluminum framing, acrylic, DC motor, gears, roller chain, rubber and steel. Courtesy the artist.

modeling and giving up control. You create all these different options, but ultimately you are deciding which image is going to become the painting.

**AD** It's a great question, and something that I have written about a lot. Whether it's draping simulated fabric, or other forms that could be called "generative,"

there is this release of control. But ultimately you do have to make a decision: which is the one that you want to deal with?

Some of the works and processes that I've designed are a lot more generative, in the sense that they fully self-assemble and build themselves—and the shapes that come out that I find to be the most

interesting feel strangely figurative. I often think about this power of pareidolia, how we see faces and other human or animal-like qualities within nature. We're built to do that—we're built to recognize other people and animals. That's just part of the way our visual cortex has evolved. So maybe other, more abstract forms come out of that as well.

**KM** These generative drawings—can you describe those?

**AD** The idea was to see if I could create a system that could generate complex structure. It came out of linguistics—this idea that infinite combinations of words and meaning can be derived from a simple system of writing. I thought there was something really beautiful about that—you can think about words as molecules, or basic building blocks of life, in a way. You can think about the emergence of life on Earth as being this process with things—billions of years of figuring out structures that could self-replicate and build.

Generative or "genetic algorithms" are a method of using evolutionary processes within the computer, or computer science, or algorithmic generation. You have a population of things, and you put in a fitness function, and then you do generation upon generation of reproduction, and you add a certain level of randomness, which is a stand-in for genetic variation, and what comes out are these things that can drift one direction or the other, depending on the fitness function. In this case, I'm the fitness function, saying "that's the interesting thing, that's not the interesting thing."

I wanted to create a system of constituent morphology, or parts, that would be a base population of things that could self-combine into larger structures. So I wrote some software to generate 3D-printed "things"—they look like more complicated Tetris shapes: blocky, rectilinear, all contiguous forms. I then built a reaction machine—a kind of agitator that allows these parts to mix and eventually form connections, building more and more complex structures. The shapes were very, very tiny to be efficient (the basic cube unit measured 3mm each side), and they basically turned around within a watery solution, this kind of primordial soup. They would be left to do that for 30 or 40 hours, and then I would come back and open it up, and it's really amazing the kinds of structures that self-assembled.

Because the process was isolated to the reaction chamber and the forms were so small—the largest assemblies were 50 to 60mm in the longest dimension—I made drawings and 3D-modeled versions that simulated that action, showing the things that self-evolved and self-assembled in interesting ways. Again, a lot of them felt figurative.

We tend to think about technology as being this unnatural thing. Artificial intelligence systems now are getting to the point where we don't understand exactly what's happening inside them, because they can learn in ways that we can't fully take apart—it's a "Black Box." However, those structures are really based on human logic, human experience; this is human math that we've been able to figure out. Human interpretations of the world are really the basis for computer systems. So they are very human, very much extensions of our tendencies and our behaviors, which I think is kind of beautiful.

**KM** I know your mother and brothers are artists; has their work had that kind of analytical approach as well?

**AD** Not as much. I think that came from my father, who had a background in science and medicine. I wavered back and forth between more scientific pursuits from a young age. I went from marine biology to particle physics and cosmology, to eventually realizing that art was the thing that would make the most sense for me. My mother and my older brother are probably more typical in terms of the way that they work. I think that they're real painters. I think that I make real paintings, but I don't go about it the way most people do.

**KM** You've spoken about looking at the history of painting—the way that you put it was, "staring into the abyss of Art History"—and not knowing where to begin in terms of image-making.

**AD** It's a beautiful abyss, but it is overwhelming—all of this beautiful possibility, and how do you find a foothold? I think it is true that generally people who are drawn toward printmaking have an interest in the technical, or systems, in order to figure out how an image is constructed, how it is built one layer at a time. How does a matrix allow you to do certain things that you can't do any

other way? Stencils were something that I gravitated toward as a form of that. For me, it was really using systems on a physical level. Figuring out ways of entering into image-making eventually led to using a lot of digital tools. They are really a means to an end, a convenience. Computers do things that maybe we could do, but it would take too long to be practical.

**KM** My last question circles back to printmaking and this analytical way of making images. I get a sense walking around and looking at contemporary art that there is more and more of this drive toward this kind of mediation. These tools, as you've said, are beyond our immediate scope of understanding—it's not like lifting up the hood of a car and being able to see all the parts. Yet they're still of our own making.

**AD** Yes, and I think this is going to be something that we have to deal with in the future. When I talk to students, I stress the importance of trying to understand your tools. Having a grasp, of the way that a computer works, or the way the software works, or the way that a machine works, will give you a better understanding of how you could use that tool, and how you can understand your work within that process. I've always felt that if you use tools without an understanding, then you're at their mercy.

There's often a power struggle between artists and the makers of the tools. As an artist using software, you're completely subject to the fact that the company might stop making it. If those tools stop existing, one option is that you can just stop making that kind of work. But if you have a greater understanding of the tools, then you can change them, you can modify them, you can make up your own versions of them. (That said, with neural networks in artificial intelligence, there may be a Black Box [that we cannot see into]. That's a big question about artificial intelligence, and a larger discussion of how much do we understand about what we're building?) But a lot of what I'm seeing right now is people taking control of the tools that they are using.

**KM** You are involved in a nonprofit that deals with some of these issues, right?

**AD** Yes, I started Brooklyn Research with two friends from graduate school, Johnny Lu and Ezer Longinus. Part of it is a coworking space for people that need

access to digital fabrication and things like 3D printing, laser cutting, CNC machines and that kind of thing. We also host artist talks and research-driven programming. One of our research groups is Print Technologies, which is there to explore new ideas, new techniques and new conceptual interest in print and technologies of printmaking.

**KM** Well, it's very exciting work, and we're lucky to have you as part of the print community.

**AD** Thank you, it's something that I'm very happy to be a part of. ■

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*Alex Dodge is an artist who lives and works in Brooklyn.*

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*Kate McQuillen is a Brooklyn-based artist working in painting and installation.*