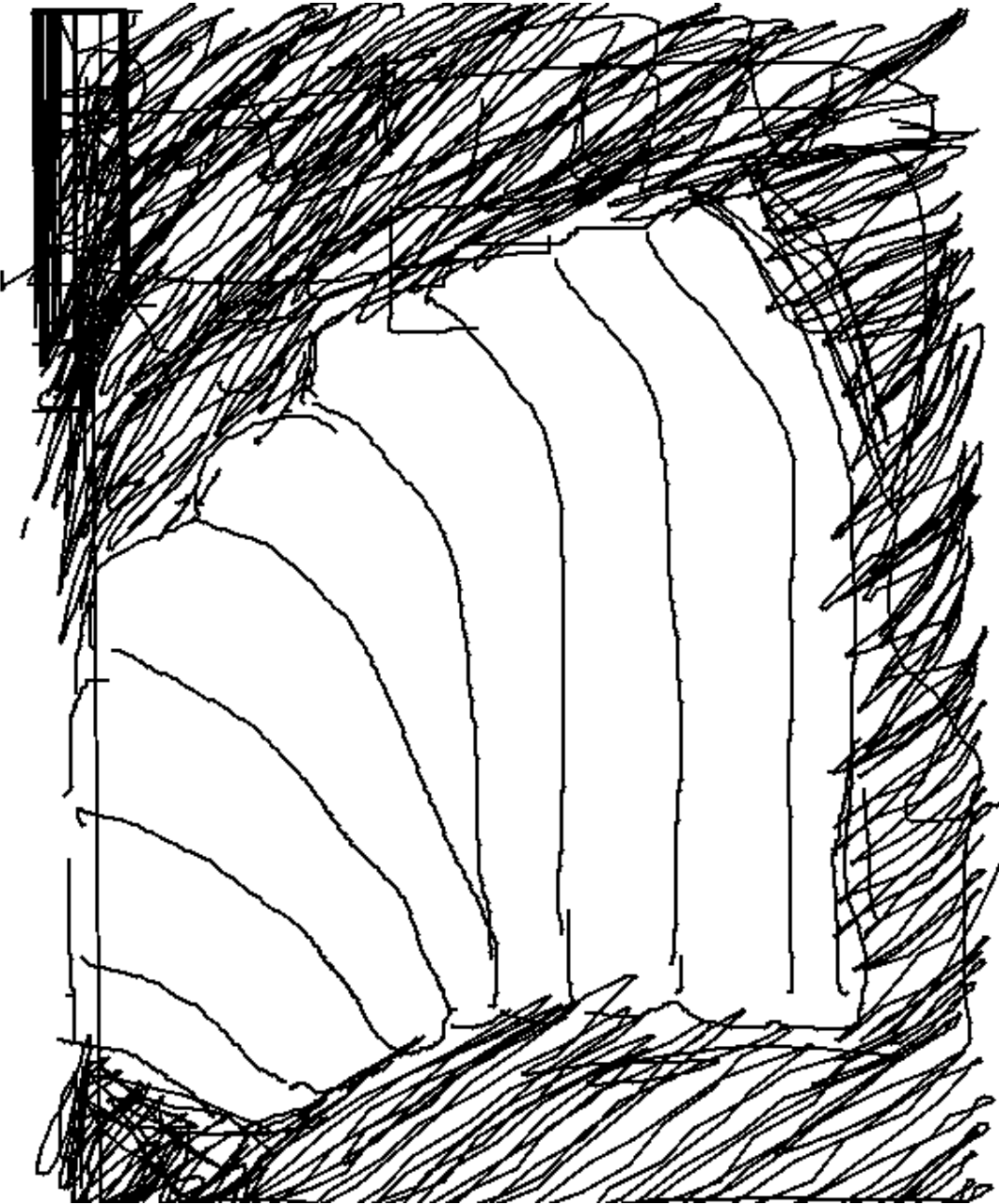


ART ON THE SCREEN: FROM REAL TO VIRTUAL SPACE

By Hywel Livingstone



John Wallbank
Segmented Object, 2013
Kobo drawing

The ubiquity of the tablet and smartphone is undeniable, and for many leaving the house or indeed the room without one is unthinkable. Screen-based devices have revolutionised our lives in terms of convenience and mass communication, and have also begun to mediate both the way we think and the way we see. The ability to comfortably view everything from stocks and shares to family albums and the latest Hollywood blockbuster, combined with consolidation of daily tasks via an almost limitless array of applications all on a single device has irreversibly changed our cultural landscape - and, in turn, has some fascinating implications for the world of visual art.

Artists respond to the world around them, and for us to ignore such a worldwide shift in absorption of information and perception of images would be disingenuous. David Hockney has applied his mercurial genius to everyday forms of mass-production (the photocopier, the fax, the Polaroid) for decades, drawing attention to their creative possibilities, whilst in doing so democratising the 'high art' form of painting with its associated museological hierarchy. His recent iPad and iPhone paintings are no exception, once again taking a technology (or an app) available to all that possess the host device (no training, no qualifications necessary) and exploring its potential to its highest level - both in terms of execution and dissemination. In a swift and simple move Hockney alleviates the uneasy relationship between the art world and the smartphone/tablet (namely the passivity of the gallery goer who stores visual information digitally, diluting his primary engagement with the real thing) by pre-emptively using the medium of secondary viewing as the work itself, elevating and once again democratising the status of the screen.

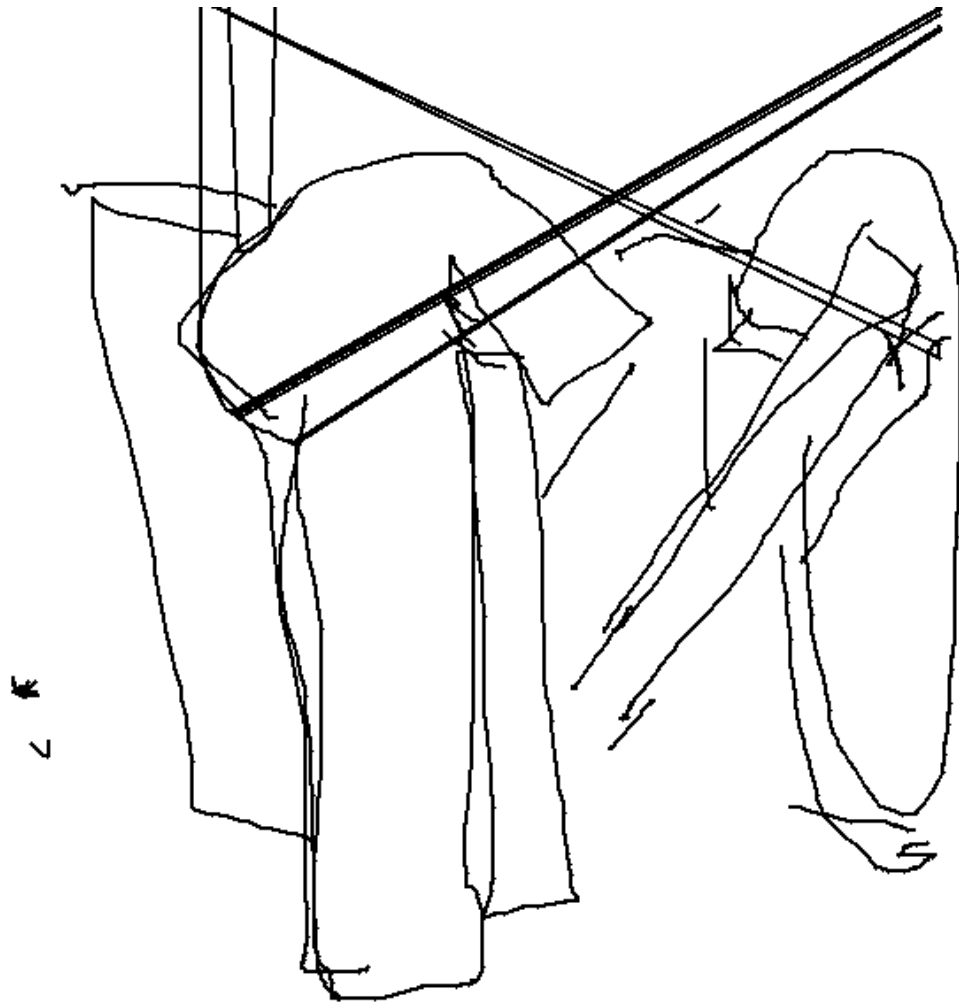
The leap from framed image on the wall to framed digital image on the screen is significant and, as Hockney has proved, can be explored exploited and refined. But how do sculptors deal with the screen? It has become unfashionable today to categorise artists as either painters, sculptors, printmakers and so on, yet sculptors still exist as do the people who make them, and the basic necessary criteria for the making and viewing of sculpture is fixed - space is required, the displacement of which through the creation of a three dimensional object forces the viewer to move and therefore engage in an ambulatory rather than static fashion. This would appear to disqualify the use of the screen and the modes of viewing it engenders from anything sculptural, yet increasingly the two forms are influencing each other.

The contemporary sculptor, John Wallbank (*Ambit 214*) juxtaposes different and often incongruous industrial materials, sensitively negotiating their inherent qualities in order to create and then immediately resolve formal problems, resulting in objects that lie somewhere between precarious unease and harmonious autonomy. The limitations of the materials he uses (plywood, plastic, foam etc) combined with their behaviour when forced together create a space where there is very little room for forward planning, meaning that the work can only be created responsively in the studio - 'in the moment'. Whilst it may be impossible to pre-design and then execute a sculpture in this fashion, creating drawings in parallel to his sculptural practice is vital, if only to retain the fleeting notion of an object long enough to reach the studio. Wallbank has found a way of doing this with a simple, generic e-reader. The basic programme he uses does not attempt to simulate another medium - there are no features to create tone, texture colour and so on. The single pixel-width line is drawn with a finger on the screen, and the distance between thought and creation is about as small as it could be. By letting the limitations of his chosen format and the lack of creative embellishment free up his process, Wallbank is able to - as with his sculptures - allow the material to exist in its purest, and most enlightening form.



Previous page: David Hockney
The Desk, July 1st 1984
Photographic collage
48 x 46"
Edition 20 of 20
© David Hockney

Below: John Wallbank
Picture 70, 2013
Kobo drawing



David Hockney
The Arrival of Spring in Woldgate, East Yorkshire in 2011 (twenty eleven) - 4 May
iPad drawing printed on paper
55 x 41 1/2"; Edition of 25
Edition 20 of 20
© David Hockney
Photo credit: Richard Schmidt



It is notable that some of the artists who explore the potential of digital viewing in the most significant way are those who have something to compare it to, and have known a considerable part of their careers without it. Michael Craig-Martin (born 1941) like Hockney (born 1937) is an expert in two dimensions and has an affinity with methods of mass production - printmaking being an integral part of both artists' practice. Craig-Martin has effortlessly taken his images out of two dimensions, and into three. Despite retaining the flatness associated with their 2D cousins, the sculptures, by definition, have a side and a back which, combined with their outsized scale and outdoor context, demand exploration. However, unlike with conventional sculpture, information about the objects being scrutinised is lost rather than gained as the viewer negotiates their way around them, their simple sign-like clarity exposed as a kind of linguistic pun. The visual information we need to understand Craig-Martin's sculptures is clear only when the conventional sculptural viewing modes stop, and we stand still in front of them allowing their illustrative qualities to return. Finally, after we've done our bit like good viewers of art, contemplating and digesting from different angles and distances, we can reach for the digital camera in order to record the moment, proving we've been there and seen it, before heading for the gift shop. It is only then, looking at the sculpture through the flattening digital screen, that the image is finally made whole, and appears in three dimensions. It is ironic (and no doubt intended) that the discombobulating experience of only achieving true clarity and understanding of the sculpture through a digital screen despite the 'real' object being right there in front of us in real time and space, cannot be reproduced on the printed page, and the reader must imagine these effects. Craig-Martin knows the way people behave, and he knows that when they look at art (especially outdoors free from museum convention) they all have smartphones or digital cameras with them. By combining and subverting what we see in reality and what we see digitally, he, like Hockney and Wallbank, is telling us that the screen is here to stay, and if the ways of viewing art are changing, then so must the ways of making it.

Left: Michael Craig-Martin
Gate (white), 2011
Powder coated steel
Edition 1 of 3 + 1 AP

296 x 256 x 2 cm / 9ft 7 x 8ft 4 x 13/16 ins

© the artist, courtesy New Art Centre, Roche Court Sculpture Park and Gagosian Gallery

Hywel Livingstone is a sculptor who lives and works in London and Cheltenham. He studied Fine Art at Winchester School of Art in 2003, and then completed an MA in Art History at the University of Bristol in 2011. Livingstone has exhibited across the UK and in America. He was awarded the Royal Society of British Sculptors Bursary Award in 2003. www.hywellivingstone.com