

MARSIA ALEXANDER-CLARKE: VIDEO PAINTING

By Peter Frank

I call my video, video as mark, in reference to the *marks* found in drawing and painting. Capturing the play of light on plants the marks become slices of time interrelating across the space of the screen. They create a visual narrative which develops sequentially, like a silent, visual fugue. – Marsia Alexander-Clarke

In a sea of spectacle, find the quiet glimmer. The digital age demands and produces a relentless cascade of visual, para-visual, and extra-visual effect. But our brains, and souls, cannot endure, or at least encompass, such unyielding onslaught any more than we can escape it. What our consciousness also requires is the electronic equivalent of the still, small voice, an intimacy that transcends scale and sensation. The elegant, shadowy geometries of Marsia Alexander-Clarke, pulsing, aqueous, and magical, provide that voice, leading us away from the void of the din and towards the event horizon of the understatement.

In fact, although she works entirely with video media, Alexander-Clarke is hardly a “digital artist” at all. Even technically, she engages electronic technology on what by now constitutes a rudimentary basis, one which reaches back as far as half a century to the early explorations of video installation and visual-sonic parallel. Her sensibility is delicate, rhythmic, linear, situated in optical space and reliant on time, the fourth dimension, as a support rather than as a tool. Her individual images and overall compositions indeed change before our eyes, but it’s a graceful, deliberate change. Temporal development is relatively slow; it is an integral part not so much of her aesthetic – her manner of making – as of her sensibility – her artistic personality. Alexander-Clarke considers herself a maker of paintings, of drawings, of marks, not of images per se. Time happens to be a framework she has been able to unlock and leave open; and in this framework she composes abstract sequences that morph, however subtly or dramatically, as we stand before them.

Whether or not any of her installational works incorporate the television monitors we associate with video art, Alexander-Clarke’s approach does not depend on, address, or even acknowledge the physical condition of the monitor. Rather, she thinks in terms of walls and rooms – the video image as mural or even in space, not on video screen. Alexander-Clarke acknowledges surfaces upon which images can dance, architectural enclosures where structures as rhythmic and planar as the spaces they occupy can unfold in a cyclical manner at once performative and decorative, or should I say decorous. Duration does not matter, but pattern and repetition do.

The elements comprising Alexander-Clarke's video-space-events bristle with hints of recognizable imagery. People and/or things seem to be moving within bright, narrow slats or apertures that alternately generate and advance away from one another. The play of light and shadow that gives the work its lyricism and thrumming elegance issues from a mode of perception that distills the seen world down to a cluster of elusive identities. Those identities are not what is of concern to the artist, however; their elusiveness is.

Alexander-Clarke brings us back from the clamorous present to the raw but delicate mediascape out of which digital art emerged decades ago, when it first distinguished itself from the analog. She re-explores the qualities of early video art as it escaped the monitor but held onto the plastic values of painting and sculpture and even drawing. At a time when television was considered a narrative medium, video artists were making abstraction of it, recapitulating the emergence of non-objective art out of cubism and conceptual art out of minimalism. Most of all, Alexander-Clarke concentrates on the abstract image whose identity has dissolved into a filmic – *not* digital – brew. She seeks to work on and with the big screen, not the small.

As noted, these patterns and processions belong on an immersive or nearly immersive physical expanse, not inside a box. Today's monitors can reach such an expanse, giving Alexander-Clarke new supporting devices to employ. But these broadened screens approach and even achieve the visual conditions she seeks, conditions which translate video into painterly gesture – the “video as mark” she cites as her goal. This approach asks for a less passive, more mental as well as sensate engagement on the viewer's part; beautiful as they are, Alexander-Clarke's works do not overwhelm or entertain, they involve and stimulate cognition, and even comprehension. They point at something both smaller and larger than themselves (or the viewer). As the artist writes, “The narrow linear marks are echoes of the narrow lens through which I experience my surroundings. In a larger sense they are echoes of the limitations of human understanding. How little we know about the universe, about nature, about ourselves.”

In this regard, Marsia Alexander-Clarke regards her art, and perhaps all art, as asking the questions that science answers – questions that each of us, scientist or not, ponders as cosmic riddles whose mystery we regard as beautiful. This ethos, too, harks back to the “digital moment, ’that point at which electronic art gained its reflexivity and, as digital art, sought to reveal universes of experience. Alexander-Clarke still seeks such revelation, and seeks to share them with us, maintaining focus by restraining form, color, and composition into an astringent but compelling visual music choreographed across and beyond walls.

Los Angeles

January 2023

Peter Frank is Associate editor for Visual Art Source and former Senior Curator at the Riverside (CA) Art Museum. He has served as Editor of THE magazine Los Angeles and Visions Art Quarterly and as critic for the Huffington Post, Angelino magazine, and the L.A. Weekly. Frank was born in 1950 in New York, where he wrote art criticism for The Village Voice and The SoHo Weekly News. He has written several books and numerous exhibition catalogues. Over his fifty-year career Frank has also organized dozens of theme, survey, and solo exhibitions for galleries and institutions in America and Europe.