

Painting With Code



The idea that painting's death is imminent has persisted since the advent of the daguerreotype. But for digital artist Siebren Versteeg, painting is more relevant than ever.

For the past few years, the Brooklyn-based artist has been making paintings randomly generated by algorithmic code. Versteeg doesn't simply want to make a digital artwork—colored pixels cleverly arranged and printed onto a canvas. He has a singular intent: to understand what a painting, in its essence, really is.

In his modernist-informed abstractions, brushstrokes butt up against canvas edges or form moats around thick blobs of color. Droplets trickle down the surface. Technically speaking, these aren't paintings at all, but images printed from a 60-inch ink-jet onto canvas and fitted onto stretchers.

"It's a self-taught study of the specifics of how the material might be applied," Versteeg says, "but it's all in a hypothetical space." To create them, Versteeg writes computer code that makes decisions about a number of variables: the paint's viscosity and dimensionality; the size of a brush, its number of bristles, and their density and thickness. Variables confront how the brush pulls the color across the canvas, the speed at which paint dries, when the brush runs out of paint—even how one color blends with the color beneath it. All in all, each bristle takes about 20 different properties into consideration.

The whole process comes together as Versteeg gently steers the program, exporting a painting every hour or two. A small percentage of his work makes it onto canvas. In one such work, a splotch of orange hangs on the bottom corner like an afterthought in a child's finger painting. Versteeg hung it on the wall, spent time with it, and found appreciation. "The paintings I tend to go for are the ones I'm most surprised by," he admits. "They feel a little wrong or strange, or somehow extend beyond their own potential."

