

# **The Symbiosis of Traditional and Digital Techniques**

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**Art forms today are seen as either traditional or digital, and intense discussions over the value and potential of one technological approach over the other often take place. Such separation between art forms is unnatural and limiting. Instead of cutting the cord between the pre-digital and the digital era, special attention should be paid to the art expression cultivated by the merging of traditional with digital techniques. This essay will investigate the important role of such relationship by exploring the unique possibilities for artistic manifestation, as well as by proving the significant placement of such symbiosis of techniques in art history. Examples of art pieces by different generations of artist (William Kentridge, Shahzia Sikander, and Nina Paley), and their workflows will be explored as evidence of successful and seamless employment of both traditional and digital practices, dovetailing into each other by sharing form and idea.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Why do people always need to compare and judge, and make themselves pick one thing over another? Often, when we go on line, turn on the TV or the radio, we come across this tendency, of people trying to present things as either black or white. It seems, we put ourselves in this constant stage of conflict, where one needs to pick a side, and once labeled, to retreat to either side of the big VERSUS.

In art, it appears, it is not much different: the conversation (or rather emotional argument) about traditional techniques versus computer technologies, hand-created versus computer-generated, and analog versus digital, amazingly, continues to be a heated topic. The VERSUS rises as an artificial separation, built in the midst of the natural process of development and advancement in art affected by science. The VERSUS puts up a barrier, where there should be a bridge; it creates a war zone, where symbiosis should be cultivated.

All in art that is created now and will be created in the future is based on the knowledge from the past; all the inspiration for the potential innovations is rooted in history. The process of expansion, in terms of toolsets and ways for artistic expression, is not a sudden change, and therefore sharp division between techniques and creative manifestations is unnatural. Trying to reject what comes before the “next,” and quickly labeling it as “old-fashioned,” seems limiting. Why not choose or mix techniques, trying to find the toolsets that best fit our aesthetics and workflow, instead of wasting energy in labeling toolsets as “retro” or “contemporary”?

Traditional activities like painting, drawing and sculpture have been radically transformed by the digital technologies.<sup>[1]</sup> The development of science, and particularly the creation of the computer, has open fresh potential for artists by giving them almost unlimited opportunities for creation. Why limit ourselves to composition, form, colors and textures, when one could also experiment with time, sound and movement? Why not add more dimensions to our work, if we have the tools available? Symbiosis between traditional and digital techniques achieves maximum artistic impact, while building a bridge between the pre-digital and the digital era.

### Historical, Theoretical and Cultural Context

This bridge between the traditional and digital is seamlessly employed in the works of animation artists like William Kentridge, Shahzia Sikander, and Nina Paley. Their pieces are examples of an equal employment of the traditional and the digital techniques. The animations these artists create could not exist if only digital or traditional media were used. The different techniques dovetail into each other by sharing form and idea.

During an interview with David Sylvester, Francis Bacon said that he never wanted to invent a new technique. He thought that artists who wanted to invent new techniques in fact limited their scope. What he wanted to do was reinvent an earlier technique that had been handed down to him. Did Kentridge, Sikander, and Paley reinvent new approaches, and if they did, was that the goal? The margins between traditional and contemporary, both symbolically and technically, are interwoven and blurred. As Sikander says, “the boundaries are gray.”<sup>[2]</sup> The borderline is not vigilant in the process of creation when the expression of content is most significant; it becomes important later, as it rises as a crucial issue of reinventing and breaking tradition, expanding limitations, and “finding new ways of making meaning.”<sup>[3]</sup> The issue becomes important when such works with reinvented content and techniques become representative of our ever-changing world, by challenging stereotypes while actually building on tradition. What subverts the tradition is creating an art form that embodies the past and the present within.

While Kentridge, Sikander and Paley have very distinctive and unique ways in the creation of their artwork, they share a similarity in the process: starting by hand painting with traditional techniques, they digitalize and animate afterwards; and those terms do not seem to work in opposition to each other; on the contrary. William Kentridge has a “now-signature technique: he photographs his charcoal drawings over time, recording scenes as they evolve. He draws, erases, and redraws, photographing each step of the process, animating an entire film on a single sheet of paper. Every movement leaves behind faded traces, making the process a visible part of the work itself”<sup>[4]</sup>



1. William Kentridge, *Stereoscope* 1998–99. Animation Still

2. William Kentridge, *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old*, 1991, Animation Stills

Sikander combines traditional Mughal miniature-painting techniques with digital animation. She uses materials like dry pigments, gouache, ink, tea, and vegetable color on paper for her detailed images, which afterwards she layers and animates. Pre-defined icons become open-ended narratives as Sikander abstracts by removing and adding context to her slow-motion-like imagery.



1. Shahzia Sikander, *SpiNN*, 2003, Animation Still

2. Shahzia Sikander, *The Last Post*, 2010, Animation Still

Nina Paley uses a variety of animation styles and techniques: from animated watercolor paintings through traced dance movements to shadow puppets; all done by hand and animated in Flash and After Effects. In addition, she mixes techniques further by adding smooth computer 2D cartoon-style animation, and expressionistic rotoscoped scenes.



*Nina Paley, Sita Sings the Blues, 2009, Animation Stills*

The artists' own aesthetics result in a hybrid of traditional and contemporary styles. They explore the role of labor and craftsmanship, tools and techniques in contemporary art, and how and when these practices impact meaning. Kentridge, Sikander and Paley are visual storytellers who interpret stories that have influenced and inspired them and construct new narratives from recognized cultural forms to confront stereotypes and oppression. The historic and cultural references in these artists' work are rich and intense. They provide a collection of political and social ideas, topics, and themes on humanity charged with personal experiences, memories, and context. Some of the themes are the role of the artist in society, as well as transformation, process, and play.

The artists see transformation as developing experience: transformation of material and transformation of thought. The significance is not in the final piece of evidence itself; it is in the process. For Sikander, transformation is about "understanding that change is constant, appreciating and respecting" that fact; it is very much about "resilience and the ability to learn and grow."<sup>[5]</sup> For Paley, the process of transformation happens as she makes herself vulnerable by exposing and airing out her personal "shame" in the course of narration. Kentridge believes that life is about "understanding the world as process, rather than a fact."<sup>[6]</sup>

It is interesting how people today tend to perceive the world as series of facts, rather than as process. Maybe this has to do with our digital age and the way all the information around us is transmitted and recorded: in discrete packages of data. Every picture we take, e-mail we send and conversation we have over the Internet breaks down our information into digits. Our voices become nothing more than numerous messages that are "coded and decoded, compressed and decompressed, bungled and corrected, lost and repeated, shredded and then stitched back together again, all so many times," that it is a miracle in the end the facts of our voices are put together in a coherent way.<sup>[7]</sup> Our minds are quickly getting used to the idea of breaking down information into small, manageable pieces of data, easy to edit and easy to undo. But in life, things continue to be material, and undoing and redoing takes effort, time, and

energy. Life takes courage and patience, discipline and practice, and with experience it is easier for us to control it. Being part of a material world while immersed in a nearly immaterial digital world can be confusing and challenging, but definitely motivating and inspiring. Similarly, in art, that space between traditional and digital is full of vibration, possibilities, and alterations, and has a personality of its own. It is a place of freedom and transformation. It is charged with movement, intensity, and change. It is like dusk: it connects the day and the night but it is not light nor darkness, it is a merger, a channel, a relationship.

Kentridge perceives cinema as high level of transformation, because the difference between one frame and the next can be dramatic. He finds inspiration in the early animations and drawings of the first cinemagician Georges Melies, and particularly in his 1902 film *A Trip to the Moon*. Georges Melies was a French filmmaker famous for his innovations in special effects. He accidentally discovered the stop-trick, or substitution, and was one of the first filmmakers to use multiple exposure and time-lapse. Melies started doing painting in his studio, performing in front of it, and filming that. He continued this technique in *A Trip to the Moon*, stating the three necessary things for performing are actor, scenery, and camera. Melies was referred to as the first cinemagician because of his ability to seemingly manipulate and transform reality through cinematography. Kentridge says: “You see how a magic trick is done, but if it is done well, it remains magic.”<sup>[8]</sup>

For Sikander the process of miniature painting is both inspirational and a way of being in control because it requires strong discipline and labor. She has great respect for tradition and the patience and time associated with it. Born and raised in Pakistan, Sikander found inspiration in manuscript paintings and book illustrations. She was educated in the ritualistic and methodical way of traditional techniques of Mughal miniatures. She finds this process meditative and familiar because of all the years that have gone into it. However, this art form does not deal much with the personal and the self-expression. The genre’s typical subjects include portraits, events and scenes from court life, wild life and hunting scenes, and illustrations of battles. The purpose of Sikander on taking on miniature painting was to experiment with it and to question its relevance. She transforms the impersonal stylization that is all about surface, palette, composition and form, to personal self-expression that evolves around the artist’s feelings and experiences she has had with life and people. By blending the Eastern emphasis on precision and methodology with the Western focus on creative, subjective expression, Sikander transports traditional techniques into the realm of contemporary art.

Nina Paley, an American artist born in the late sixties, is a contemporary animator raised in the tradition of articulacy and expressiveness. In her recent feature movie animation *Sita Sings the Blues* (2009), Nina found her inspiration in her own pain caused by the rejection of her husband. The process of the development of her narrative was a way of getting in touch with her inner self, a technique for looking for answers through exploration, and a path for healing. Paley’s personal crisis caused her

to see deeper into the Indian Epic story of Ramayana. Moved by the relationship of the goddess Rama and Sita incarnated as humans, the artist was inspired to seek answers in times that happened 3,000 years ago. As Rama rejects pure Sita without explanation, retelling the story of Ramayana was cathartic to the artist. While in the original Indian epic Sita is just a footnote to the story, in Paley's animation, the focal point is Sita's suffering. Though inspired by the traditional story of Ramayana, Paley did not set out to tell THE Ramayana, she reinvented HER own Ramayana. Paley says: "Pain is funny. It can either burn you or it can fuel something."<sup>[9]</sup>

William Kentridge was born in 1955, in Johannesburg, South Africa. The history of his country, including the issues of segregation, apartheid, and violence, has had a prominent impact on Kentridge's work. Having witnessed first-hand one of the twentieth century's most controversial struggles – the termination of apartheid – Kentridge brings the subtlety of personal experience to public subjects.<sup>[10]</sup> William Kentridge draws upon tragedy as subject matter for his work. Even though it may seem as a "very cold-blooded act of using others people's pain as raw material for the work," the artist appropriates it by depicting, contemplating, and spending the time with it.<sup>[11]</sup> The drawing itself becomes a compassionate act. It is the usage of traditional drawing techniques that brings Kentridge close to his subjects. The artist says that if he spends one or two days drawing an object or an image in the activity of making work, there is sympathy towards that object embodied in the human labor of making the drawing; the dedication to the image and the physical hours spent studying it are in themselves an act of understanding.

Even though Kentridge works without a script or storyboard, with only one or two key images in mind when starting a sequence, he puts enormous thought into his films. He enjoys the sense that it is possible to work without a plan in advance. The artist believes that if there is something of interest inside him, it will come out.<sup>[12]</sup> He plots out each animation, preserving each addition and erasure by giving it a quarter of a second to two seconds screen time. A single drawing is altered and photographed in this manner until the end of the scene. Afterward, the final drawings of each scene are displayed along with the films as finished pieces. His successive charcoal drawings are always created on the same sheet of paper, contrary to the traditional animation technique, in which each movement is drawn on a separate sheet. This way, Kentridge's films come to preserve the traces of the previous drawings, creating the sense of fading memories and time passing.

For Kentridge, the process of animation is a field of depicting transformation. The provisional charcoal drawings, "the fact, that they are going to be succeeded by the next stage of drawing is very good for someone who is very bad at committing to something being finished."<sup>[13]</sup> The artist says charcoal is very fortuitous, and thus an appropriate material for animation. Not only is its tonal range very good for photographic film, but also its speed of transformability: it is very easy to erase, so Kentridge can change it as quickly as he can think.

The sheet of paper that he draws on is attached on the wall, and half way across the studio is his camera. He alters his drawing and walks back to the camera to take two shots, and then walks back to the drawing to continue with the modifications. If the scene is 100-frames-long, Kentridge walks back and forth 50 times. Often, each sequence is altered hundreds of times. The artist says that it is during this physical walk between the camera and the drawing, that the new images and ideas suggest themselves; it is that time of uncertainty that allows the recognition of something as it appears.<sup>[14]</sup>

In a similar way to Kentridge, who needs the feel of fidgeting and sizzling of charcoal in his hands, and who thinks best with his hands, rather than on a keyboard, Sikander immerses herself in the physical act of traditional painting and the seductiveness of the materiality of the surface. While she is free to not use the prescribed rules of traditional Mughal techniques, she chooses to apply the structured traditional form in order to explore the tension that comes with a set of rules. Her interest is in the physical act of doing it; it is in the hours put into creating that translucency, which in the end is a gesture. That physical investment and submission to the materiality is “more about subversion of modernity than subverting tradition.”<sup>[15]</sup>

On a conceptual level, Sikander’s imagery serves a function: by creating a form that uses the personal, the cultural, and the historical, she develops an icon that investigates issues of border crossing, and exists by connecting tradition with contemporary context. She draws with multiple references within the tradition. The artist taps in the cultural and the personal but her work is in-between: it is neither cultural nor personal. Thus, as a reflection of her conceptuality, the technological employment of both traditional and digital techniques seems only natural.

Sikander has her ideas and expresses them in as many ways as possible. Her animation process is yet another way to explore both formal and subjective issues within the parameters of the miniature. Using digital technology is not much different for her than using some of her traditional approaches. In her animations, Sikander layers multiple images, in a way similar to layering multiple washes of paint. The properties of layering have always been important for the artist to emphasize the conceptual ideas of fluidity. Through animation, Sikander is able to accentuate transformation: her elements are not only on top of one other, but they are constantly moving, appearing and disappearing, thus altering perception by providing another way to look at the same thing. The animation process allows for smearing of time between the frames and slowly building up a surface to then subtract from it, not by accident, but by another type of violation of that space. The simultaneous existence of another form of exploration within that space is what allows for tension to exist. The many layers are not just process related. Conceptual layering is always the focus for Sikander; it becomes her way of trapping her various issues and ideas.

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Combining digital and traditional techniques with an established, but

reinvented, genre allows the artist to build a relationship between present and past, space and dimension, narrative and time, and all that in service of destabilization. Sikander's animations carry hidden information between the layers of awareness, suggesting multiple meanings through the subtle shifts of images. In Sikander's animations, "technology is not instant, it is controlled."<sup>[16]</sup>

In many ways, Paley's film *Sita Sings the Blues* is a merging point, finding middle ground by bringing together personal, cultural, and technological concerns. While the Ramayana motivated Paley to produce her film, this deeply personal project was also greatly inspired by the song records of Annette Hanshaw, an American jazz singer from the 1920s. When Paley heard for the first time her sweet, vulnerable voice, singing of heartbreak and "man-done-her-wrong," without any bitterness, the artist felt the songs went to the same place within her, like the Ramayana.<sup>[17]</sup> Though the songs come from a completely different era, separate from both today and ancient India, they were telling the same story about the difficulty of life without love. Paley decided to put Annette Hanshaw's voice into Sita's mouth, probably because these songs show how the story of heartbreak in the Ramayana transcends time and culture.

*Sita Sings the Blues* is an original compilation of various traditional and digital animation techniques. Paley emphasizes the main storylines of her movie by using eclectic animation styles: from traditional hand drawn 2D animation and cut-outs through collages and tapestry-inspired hand-painted backgrounds to keyframing. Paley's animation techniques compliment each other and the narratives of the film in a rich, colorful, and intimate way. This creative approach makes the movie an enjoyable experience by breaking one's expectation every 30 seconds.

Paley's movie, as her own interpretation of the Ramayana, became controversial among some Hindus in India and elsewhere. They found the animation irreverent, and especially offensive in the way Sita was portrayed, with her narrow waist and big hips. Others felt the cartoony style was inappropriate for portraying such icons, or that there was too much focus on Sita, rather than Rama.<sup>[18]</sup> Most of the feedback for Paley's film has been positive; it is interesting, however, how the appropriated tradition as well as the choice of techniques play such a crucial role in the way a movie is perceived. Paley's answer to such confrontations is that artist's only responsibility is to be true to her/his own vision.<sup>[19]</sup> This principle is revealed in Paley's work by the free collaging and interpreting of content, while integrating toolsets.

## Conclusion

The symbiosis of traditional techniques with computer technologies in the contemporary art scene is an important and powerful bridge connecting the pre-digital and the digital era. The merging of traditional and contemporary toolsets leads to a effective realization of skills and an explosion of creative potential. Such fortunate

relationships of merging can be best cultivated if an artist is trained in both traditional and digital technologies. Having experience and understanding of the process of either technique encourages respect for the labor and knowledge involved, while opening the possibilities. From the point of view of realization, labeling of techniques as “old-fashioned,” or “impersonal,” seems inadequate. Having competitive discussions about the value of traditional versus digital techniques is simply insufficient. The truth is, neither the digital nor the traditional art forms need to be saved. There is so much more in terms of the cultural and historical relationship that gives the artwork its dimensions.

The significance of the relationship between traditional and digital techniques needs to be recognized as a unique approach in art that has its own identity and place in art history.

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