

By Jamie Brunson

While Philip Hall's compositions share some of the qualities of conventional photographs, they have much more in common with canvases produced using pigments and brushes, each detail painstakingly applied by hand. On first consideration the subjects of his recent images seem divided into distinct categories--abstract and architectural compositions, explorations of light and shadow, pensive studies of dream and illusion, wry comic tableaux. However, these categories begin to overlap under closer scrutiny as Hall's meticulous fabrication and sense of dramatic narrative repeatedly assert themselves. Hall begins his work by taking pictures with a digital camera in "visually stimulating" environments, settings that he feels have narrative or formal potential. Later, reviewing his raw digital images, he looks for distinctive forms and for subjects with the power to "surprise" him.

Hall has described his digital collage process as "painting with light". Given his early academic training as a sculptor, Hall's process might as easily be called sculpting with light; using Photoshop to refine his initial images as a sculptor might chisel at marble, Hall slowly strips away the unessential material, subtracting, cropping, matting, erasing, subtly adjusting the color content. These transformations are only the beginning steps in his preparation for combining multiple images or juxtaposing layers to produce a hyper-real image, a vision more perfectly realized than reality itself.

Light, sculpture and surrealism, the major influences on Hall's aesthetic, arise directly from his life experience. As a boy growing up in Chicago, Hall first encountered the surrealists visiting the Art Institute of Chicago with his mother, who also took him further afield, to the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan museums in New York.

In college, Hall started out as a sculpture major, eventually graduating in film from Cal-Arts in Valencia, California. His father's career in the film industry in Chicago was an important influence in his decision to pursue the art of filmmaking. Hall went on to work in Hollywood, lighting for film and television. As a camera assistant and lighting designer in the late 1970's, he worked under seasoned commercial photographers and filmmakers. From them, he learned how effectively lighting could be used to produce drama, atmosphere, composition, movement and illusion, elements that figure strongly in his visual work today.

In 1985, a neck injury and the surgery that followed changed the course of his career, and he moved from lighting for film to lighting control systems design and sales. After a second disc injury in 2000, faced with four months of recovery from a second surgery Hall began painting and drawing—an experiment he has laughingly characterized as an "absolute disaster." Yet the frustration of not being able to technically create the images in his mind through painting, led him back to photography. Hall's return to the art studies of his college years led him to experiment with 35 mm photography. From that point, using a scanner and an early, simplified version of today's image editing programs, Hall began to produce his first photo-collages. By 2002, he had graduated to shooting with a digital camera and began seriously studying digital manipulation. Digital media seemed to

perfectly fit the dichotomies of his creative personality--the meticulousness he had learned as a lighting specialist and his artistic attraction to light, color and dramatic tension.

Studying with painter and visual artist Joe Doyle as a mentor, Hall developed the detailed Photoshop technique that characterizes his current work. Initially attracted to composing surrealist imagery, he moved gradually into photographing architecture, vintage cars, and abstract compositions; in each of these thematic subsets, form, texture and color support his complex underlying narratives.

Hall's "Decaying Illusion" series contains two particularly arresting, psychologically connotative compositions featuring vintage American automobiles. Hall's satiric "God" began as an ordinary, workmanlike shot of the front end of a pink 1951 Dodge, taken from a low angle to exaggerate the monumental sense of the subject. Hall tightly cropped the image and removed all the surrounding detail, exaggerating the palette, heightening the details in the shadows and the reflective nuances in the silvery-blue chrome. He presents the automobile as a comically looming, fanged, mechanical divinity, complete with ram-like chrome horns. Part fetish object, part monster, it is the eroticized embodiment of materialist desire and automotive fantasy.

In "California Crusin'," Hall has layered warm, diffuse sunset tones over the contours of a rare vintage 1953 Corvette. The car's cherry-red taillight and the flesh-colored curves subliminally evoke the nude female form. The filtered, patterned light in this composition is the direct influence of cinematic lighting techniques Hall learned in his Hollywood years: shadowy fronds, like palm leaves in a coastal breeze, fade into and out of focus. Speaking about this iconic image, Hall

describes the way that, for him, it symbolizes his youthful dreams of fame and fortune, of driving along the Pacific coast in a sleek convertible on a warm afternoon, a beautiful girl seated at his side.

Hall's dreamy composition equally encapsulates the sensuality and nostalgia of an imaginary ideal—an ideal not only personal to Hall, but nearly archetypal to an entire generation. The poignancy of this piece strongly contrasts to the slyly satirical content of "God." In his non-objective, formal work, Hall combines elements appropriated from other sources into compositions that appear completely 'natural' despite their fabricated nature.

In "Vortex," one of his most tactile, 'painterly' pieces, he has juxtaposed reflective hard-edged lines over swirling, out-of-focus passages, recombining them into a dynamic abstraction. Sweeping curves enter the picture plane from the periphery, moving top to bottom, side to side, and leading deep into the shimmering center. The composition is animated with tension between receding and forward motion, as contours, textures and forms push, flow, and jostle within the confines of the picture plane.

Like the photorealist painters who captured the national art scene in the 1970's with their exquisitely rendered composite imagery, Hall creates an imagined reality, drawn from multiple sources and edited into a seamless whole. His invented reality mirrors, but at the same time translates the literal world into a more dreamlike, perfected interpretation.

All quotes, interviews with Philip Hall, Alameda and Oakland, California, December 2005.

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