

The .GIF Mountainsides And Internet Landscapes Of Mark Dorf

By Charlotte Japp — Oct 17, 2014



Call it "Transcendentalism, Pt. II," or "Neo-Romanticism," but *Emergence*, the Kentucky by way of Brooklyn artist Mark Dorf's latest collection of images and GIFs, shows how even the most quantitative scientific calculations are just abstractions of the "reality" we know. By breaking our images of the world down into smaller details and data sets, like the pixels in a digital photograph, a new vision of reality emerges—one composed of glitches, gradients, and GIFs.

The Creators Project spoke to Mark Dorf about his new work, *Emergence*:

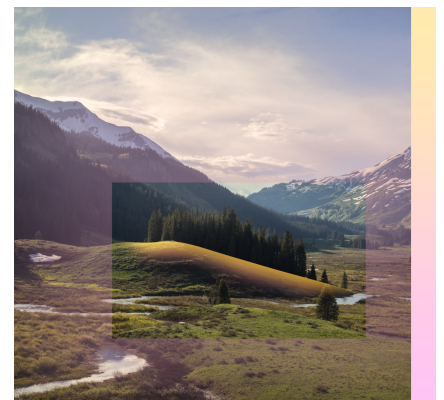
The Creators Project: In some ways, Emergence is similar to //_PATH—which showcased internet imagery within the context of nature—but in other ways, it has become more abstract. What brought you to this new direction?

All of *Emergence* was created while I was an artist in residence at the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory (RMBL) in Gothic, CO. During my time there, I was working alongside ecologists and biologists in the field assisting them with their research, observing, and creating my own works. All of the imagery seen in *Emergence* explores the ways in which we collect, dissect, and interpret information.

The works have certainly become more visually abstract than my previous series—lots of gradients, geometric forms, and complex three-dimensional transformations—but this abstraction is in fact a reflection of the scientific process. While science is often viewed as being a direct reflection of our surroundings, it is actually an abstracted version: a transformation. Never does science reach a point that is a 1:1 representation of our world; never is it exactly as we see and interact physically. I often describe the way I see science as an exponential curve that is reaching its designated limit: there is an infinitely small space that is forever in place – never does the curve actually reach its limit. I wanted to reflect this abstracted quality of science in the visual language that I used in the series.

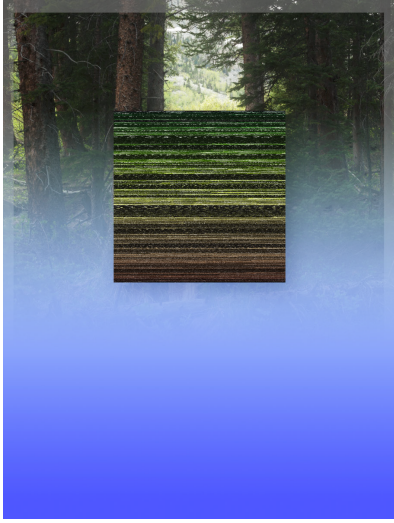
You describe the collection as the "reassembly of data" and "break[ing] reality into smaller pieces." For something that appears to be about breaking things down, why did you name this collection "EMERGENCE?"

The name *Emergence* comes from the fact that through this breaking down of our reality, and fracturing of the primary experience into smaller quantified parts and sets of data, new information about our surroundings can emerge through comparison. Often when sets of data that the scientific process creates are compared, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts—I like to explain this through half-toned printing that one might see in a color photograph printed in the newspaper. The image is really just composed of dots of cyan, yellow, magenta, and black inks but when you zoom out and look at the collection of dots, an image appears.



This often happens in science: if a data set that shows that snow is melting earlier than usual in a specific mountain range is compared to a data set that shows the rainy season is starting at the same time of year it always does, that could explain why

the wild flowers are dying earlier—the water from the snow melt fuels the blooming of the wild flowers and tides them over until the rainy season begins. But because the snow melted earlier in the year than it usually does, once the snow melts there is no more water until the rainy season begins, thus leaving a drought period leaving not enough water for the flowers and greatly reducing their lifespan.



The notion of humanity being "a set of complex relationships that we are striving to understand" is really interesting when put against the backdrop of mountains, valleys, and trees. It's sort of like the Romantics or the Transcendentalists, but finding glitches and gradients in the places where they looked for God. Do you find inspiration from older nature-based movements?

I certainly align with a lot of Transcendentalist ideals; the landscape for me is exactly where I feel most at ease and most in tune with myself and my consciousness (funny that I live in Brooklyn). This was actually a conversation that I had quite often with a lot of the scientists that I was working with in Colorado. To spend an entire month living and breathing ecology and biology at RMBL and looking through science's highly quantitative lens was a totally unique experience.

When hiking or climbing a mountain with the scientists at RMBL, it seemed like every few feet we would stop and they would mention a fact about a certain plant or identify wildlife and explore their relationship with everything that they interact with. This is an amazing ability and I am by no means criticizing the importance the study of science, but it was rare for them to sit back and look at the larger human and spiritual experience of the landscape.

Living in Brooklyn, it's sort of funny that your work has such a strong emphasis on nature. How do you reconcile your creative fixation on landscapes with living in New York?

Haha, yes this is a funny relationship to say the least – and in short the answer is that I travel... quite a bit. I used to live in upstate New York near the Catskill Mountains, and it was an amazing experience to say the least—a time in my life that I look back on quite fondly. Nearly everything I wanted was right there: the landscape, my camera, and my studio. While there was a great creative community where I was living, it just was not as creatively diverse as New York City. I have never come across such an amazing and inspiring creative peer group like I have here in Brooklyn. There is just no comparison.

Let's get technical. Your executions can be sleek and seemingly minimal, but I'm sure a lot of different practices go into its creation. What is your process like from the inception of an idea to creating it? Which specific programs and hardware/software do you use?

My process tends to change for each project, sometimes drastically, and other times just in small ways. Previous to Emergence, everything that I made I would draw out prior. I knew exactly what kind of landscape I was looking for, and I knew exactly what I wanted to composite into the image: I felt much more like a painter in that sense.

With Emergence I took a bit of a different approach. I wanted to treat my photographs like the data that was collected by the scientists that I was working with. I would travel out, photograph, return to my cabin and examine what I saw. It was only then that I knew how to proceed with the ways in which I was going to "interpret" my "data." I knew that there were a few visual keys that I wanted to keep consistent through the works; the gradient is an example of one, and I knew that there were a few processes of manipulation that I wanted to explore as well, but as for their implementation, that was decided later.

As for technical elements, I use a bit of a cocktail of software. Of course I use Photoshop to manipulate the photos, but additionally across my practice I use 3D rendering software, a little Processing code, 3D scanning, and After Effects for the works that are in motion.

You're about to travel to Peru for a residency with an organization called Hawapi. What do you plan to create there?

The project that I have planned for Peru is one of my first relatively non-photographic projects (photography is involved but is not directly the end result). Each year Hawapi invites a group of artists to a remote location in Peru to make works on a

specific social and political topic: this year we will be traveling to the glacial mountain range of Pariacaca in the Andes Mountains to create work on the subject of climate change. In my time leading up to the residency I have become incredibly interested in how glaciers are one of the largest archives of not only biological matter, such as plant life and soil, but also archives of our atmosphere and air quality. These ice sheets contain information anywhere from 500 years to 500,000 years in the past, which makes them incredible windows into the history of the ebb and flow of our planet. Given the recession of glaciers globally due to climate change, scientists are attempting to retain this information contained in the ice by drilling and preserving samples.

As a reaction to this, I will be creating my own visual and temporal archive of this glacier through photography. I have cast USB drives into rectangular bricks of concrete that I plan to drop at three different vistas looking down on the glacier. At each site I will photograph the glacier as I see it at that given moment and put the files onto the USB drive along with a text document translated into five different languages explaining exactly what it is. Additionally I will record the coordinates of where they were dropped and photograph them in the landscape. This information will be available on my website for whoever wishes to travel out and find these USB drives on the mountain. The photographs on the drive will never be published, printed, or put on the Internet to not only preserve what the glacier looked like at that given moment, but also to preserve the effort and action that is needed to hike and travel to the glacier itself: the exclusivity of space.

While the USB drives are waterproofed and cast in concrete (a material derived from the natural world but represents the human hand quite directly), they too have mortality: I am choosing not to care for them. Never will I return to the glacier to service the devices, so they will eventually degrade over time and no longer function. Thus, the concrete bricks will act as a reflection of our careless lack of action to help preserve our fragile environment in the first place.



You've recently ventured into motion graphics with gifs. With the advancement of new technology as well as your own creative journey, how do you see your work evolving in the next few years?

I certainly want to explore new means of translating our surroundings. I am constantly fascinated in the ways that a single subject can exist in so many different ways – I think that technology will help me to explore these representations. In the recent months I have felt a desire to move away from lens-based works, but who knows – only time will tell!