

Artist Profile: Mark Dorf

KERRY DORAN | Wed May 27th, 2015 4:08 p.m.



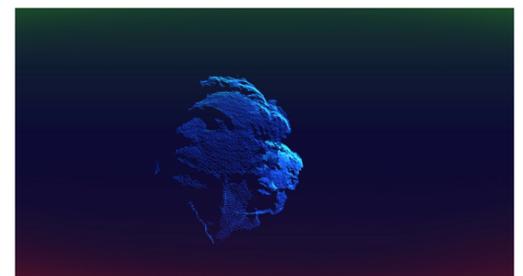
Mark Dorf, *Untitled (Sketch)* (2014)

Your work, though seemingly based on nature and natural formations, is very much about human-made, technological constructs, using a visual vocabulary we are familiar with to show us unfamiliar and often invisible forces like networked activity and virtual spaces. More broadly, it probes at the notion of "the scientific," or what we consider to be objective truth. As religion and its iconography once were, science is now our foremost means of making sense of our landscape; a way to understand the world through categories, systems, principles, equations, and technologies, which are all human-made and therefore arbitrary or fallible. How do you use landscape as a catalyst, and even a sort of iconography, to deal with the construction of objectivity or lack thereof?

Landscape itself is the set of symbols that human beings have been looking at the longest—perhaps only second to the body. It's where we originate from, so it follows suit that our symbols originate from here, too. With such a deeply rooted biological and elemental connection to the land, we find its aesthetics intensely fascinating. For instance, you would be hard-pressed to find a single person on this planet that would not consider a photograph of the Grand Canyon, even of the most amateur of quality, a quintessentially idyllic scene. We are drawn to these images, and upon seeing these kinds of symbolic references, there is an immediate sense of connection despite a void of human presence.

With that in mind, the landscape then provides me with a perfect stage that everyone is familiar with for an analysis of more abstract ideas about how we define and explore our surroundings through science and technology. The landscape is endlessly combed for information, whether that is through science, or for commercial purposes, extracting natural resources. We are completely, and forever will be, dependent upon it: we're inseparable. Even so, we still know very little about the world, and won't ever definitively know. Science never proves anything right, but instead just proves previous theories to be wrong, only to replace them with a new idea. It's a bit like an exponential curve. We will never have or be able to create strict definitions for the relationships that compose the natural world. We like to believe that our world is composed of a set of rules that we as humans can define; we want to see patterns of cause and effect, but this objective, natural world simply does not exist.

For a long time, this is exactly how we thought the landscape and ecosystems functioned: a perfect balancing act where every element has its designated place that allows for harmony between all living things. Even though there are undeniable patterns throughout nature, the natural world is chaotic and unpredictable. This process of translating the landscape and our surroundings into scientific data sets and equations seems paradoxical. You're taking a living, breathing system that is constantly in ebb and flow and attempting to translate it into a language of science and math that is rigidly defined. It's like translating poetry between languages; there's simply no way to do it without losing something in the process.



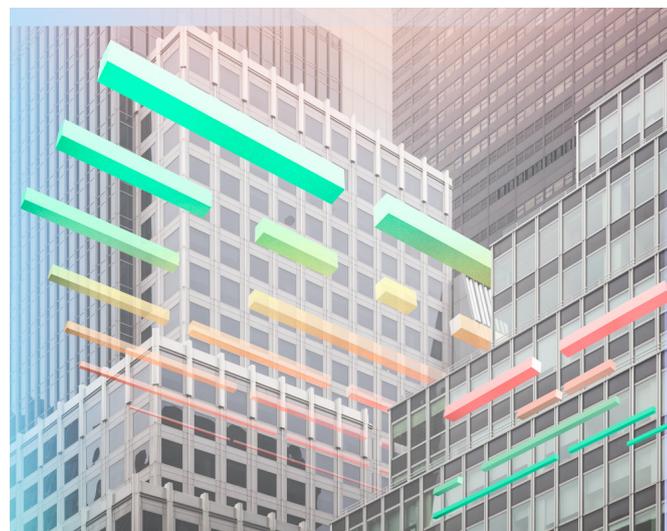
Mark Dorf, *Blue* (2014). From the series *Parallels*. In collaboration with Adam Ferris.

In your description of these systems and space, architectonics comes to mind, in the Kantian sense of systematizing knowledge, but also in a purely architectural meaning. The latter is exemplified in works such as *//_PATH* (2012) or *Axiom & Simulation* (2011), as you overlay geometric forms onto the landscape, while the former is more implicit in the way you address the human need to systematize and quantify everything around us. You demon-

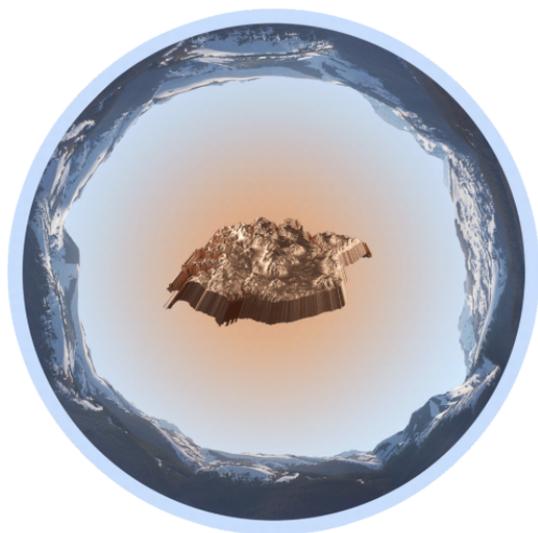
strate this by superimposing digital structures onto the physical world; or, in your recently commissioned work for the DIS Big Data Issue, you create the reference points for the architecture we cannot see. Could you explain how you make some of these forms and how they relate to the spaces in which you situate them?

Architecture signifies a systemic form of knowledge that is foregrounded in my work. In the case of //_PATH and Axiom & Simulation, I take three-dimensional forms derived from the landscapes that I photograph and overlay them to suggest an alternative means of understanding physical space, or at least a parallel. Some of these pieces were done free-hand, like Plate #3 in Axiom & Simulation, but in Plate #17, I went out and placed markers in a grid to more accurately to recreate the topographical mesh layer in virtual space. In images like untitled28 in //_PATH, you are again presented with meshes floating in space against the landscape, but these were primitive 3D scans of elements that were found in the landscape (piles of dirt, stones, small plants) where the photograph was made.

Image creation using these technologies is not only technically relevant, but also conceptually bound to how the technological eye views, quantifies, and understands our world, compartmentalizing and working within a system of observation that is created by humans but outside the capability of human eyes. Not only do these tools see the world differently, they gather and gauge information differently, too. Of course, these technologies are made for very specific purposes, but to me it suggests that through this technology, our eyes are rendered less useful than those that we can create ourselves for highly specialized purposes. We're always trying to further augment and improve our senses through technology, under the false impression that this will enable us to finally understand ourselves and the world.



Mark Dorf, *Nebulous 02* (2015).



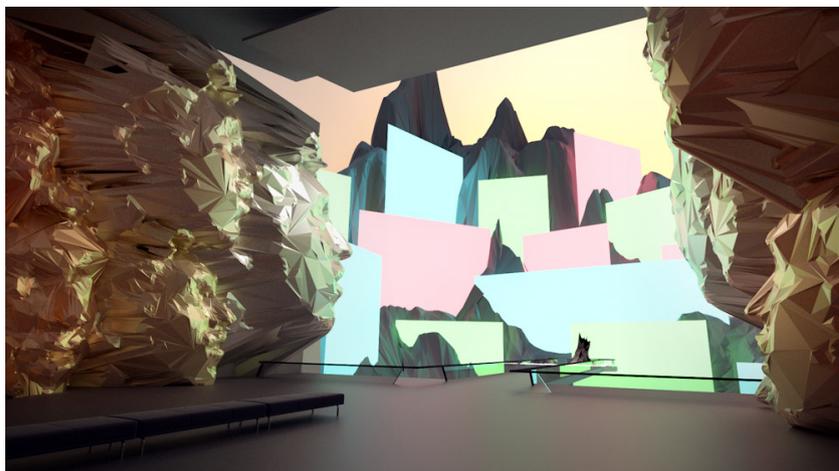
Mark Dorf, *29 Cu (Copper)* (2014). From the series *Worth*.

ness and hue, but in a three dimensional space. Applying this technique, you could then compare all imagery on the same scale independent of its content. A similar process is used in the sciences when applying different log transformations to specific data sets to make them more similar and to amplify specific patterns: it allows for disparate data to be compared more easily, enabling new information to emerge from the comparison that is only possible after the log transformation. What interests me most about this construction (or architecture) of knowledge is there are an infinite number of permutations for the same subject matter. Each one has its own specific function and singularity; visually and numerically they are different, but the source is exactly the same.

This leads me to wonder what the inverse of this process would look like. How would you collect data and then transform these datasets in virtual space? What is the architectonics of virtual space? This

//_PATH and Axiom & Simulation were made before I started directly working with the scientific community, which I do quite often now. For my series *Emergence*, I was working alongside ecologists and biologists as an artist-in-residence at the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory, so my works became much more reflective of real-world scientific practices. A lot of my process mirrored that of the researchers: I was using the landscape as my primary source of data collection, with my photographs acting as collected data, and thinking similarly to a scientist in viewing and quantifying the landscape in his or her research. I would then apply different transformations to the imagery—some automated by code and process, others by visual influence of scientific labeling, just as scientific data is translated to reveal new information through comparison of different data sets. For example, in the *Mesh Translation* works, I would take a photograph and apply it to a 3D plane so that each pixel aligned with a specific vertex—the brightness of each pixel then directed the height of each vertex so that the brightest pixels would make the vertex rise and the darkest would then fall. This process created a distinct medium of photographic imagery that escapes all of the associations of memory and nostalgia that are typically associated with photographs; instead, you are presented only with information like bright-

seems to take shape in your rooms for "Panther Modern," with virtual gallery spaces that have rooms, benches, and barricades, as one might find in a museum, but the work within these spaces defies what could physically be possible in an actual gallery. This is also true of some recent sketches of yours, with free floating sculptures in the round in one gallery, and a colored light emitting from adjacent galleries.



"Panther Modern, Room Nine: Mark Dorf" installation view (2015)

rules, similar to those that we are constantly searching for in the physical world, can exist here. However, it is important to understand that these virtual spaces, with their strict set of rules, are not acting as a reflection of the physical - they are informed by the physical, but the virtual space is totally independent of it.

I want to return to the sketches for a moment, only because they are very different from anything that I've seen you exhibit (except for Panther Modern). These works feel uninhibited, like something out of a sketchbook (for lack of a better word), and that's difficult to do: with the kind of work you're making, there isn't one simple gesture that creates a mark. Are these just experiments for you, or is your work moving in this direction?

In those pieces I was attempting to create a space that these other sculptural forms could exist in and inhabit. It's an exploration of technique and material, really. There were of course visual and compositional elements that I was exploring, such as hiding and revealing light sources and creating cold, sparse environments for the more dynamic forms to exist in, but for the most part I was playing around.

Those sketches were made just after a period of high production. I was feeling mentally exhausted but still creatively active—my mind felt cavernous with these disconnected forms coming into my periphery. There always seemed to be a light around the corner but it was difficult for me to actually get around that corner to find its source. In these sketches, the only time that the source is actually revealed, you find a group of discarded sculptures that are static and lifeless, unlike the other floating forms. To me, they exist as strange self-portraits.

As far as putting sketches on Instagram or sometimes Tumblr goes, I do tend to throw them out there to see what reverberates best with the eyes that follow. It's easy to catch the patterns of what resonates but I don't really let this affect my intentions for my more finished works. The issue I have with these social media outlets is that while it might feel like you're throwing something out there to see what reacts best, you can almost always predict the reaction because the people that follow you already know what you make and already enjoy those things. If you allow this to dictate too much of the aesthetic that you work within, I think you'll end up with a very homogeneous visual vocabulary. I try not to take social media too seriously – I think of it as a chance for people to have a little glimpse into the other side of my work.

Questionnaire:

Age: 26

Location: Brooklyn, NY

How/when did you begin working creatively with technology?

What I found most interesting about the works in "Panther Modern"—and this includes all of the artists that have worked on this project so far, not just my own—is that it is mixing two different vocabularies: the physical and the virtual. LaTurbo Avedon gave us all very tangible architecture that was curated for each artist, lending itself to the physical world and beginning the conversation with a very well understood vocabulary; but each artist is working with a 3D virtual toolbox that for the most part only has connection to the physical world in that it attempts to represent space. Other than that, there are no limits whatsoever, resulting in a mixture of different visual and physical languages in a single environment. What is interesting to me in the context of my own practice is that these spaces in fact can be perfect, in a sense. A perfect 90 degree angle can exist in the virtual world. A perfect pattern and set of

I've always been interested in technology, even when I was much younger, but I am especially interested now (of course) in considering how omnipotent it is in our daily lives. It seemed like a very natural thing for me to make work about – it's what I know and it's what I am interested in. As far as using technology creatively in my work goes, I use many different kinds of software, a bit of code and digital photography, but I wouldn't say that I use technology directly in my work other than the 3D scanned elements in `//_PATH`.

Where did you go to school? What did you study?

I studied photography and sculpture at the Savannah College of Art and Design.

What do you do for a living, or what occupations have you held previously?

I am currently a studio manager for a photographer here in NYC, but I have worked many odd jobs. In the past I've worked as a welder and fabricator, as a woodworker for a furniture shop, and as a photo assistant.

What does your desktop or workspace look like? (Pics or screenshots please!):

