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COLOUR SEPARATIONS
TONY CURRAN

31 JULY – 4 SEPTEMBER 2021

Attention Seeking Machines
Tony Curran

Everyone needs attention. In 1943 the psychologist Abraham Maslow positioned belonging, defined as 'positive attention from those you know well', third in his famous *hierarchy of needs.*[i] Topped only by physical safety and physiological needs, social needs and the desire for attention are hugely impactful to human life. Attention provides us with a sense of place, connection and community, while making significant contributions to our happiness. The catch however is that humans also hold the power over their own attention, deciding where or to whom to direct theirs, placing them in a position that is at once vulnerable and powerful.

Currently we are in the third industrial revolution and arguably the most important period in the information era since Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the early 15th century. Shoshana Zuboff, Harvard Business School's first female professor, claims in *Surveillance Capitalism* that our attention is paramount and might be being used against us.[ii] As we are vying for attention ourselves, so are tech companies. Zuboff states that multinational corporations such as Facebook harvest and sell the attention of 1.4 billion people every day through devices that 'claim human experience as a free raw material into behavioural data'.

Computers and digital businesses then, much like humans, rely on attention. They captivate our attention, rely on improvements made by assessing the processes which capture or lose our focus, and in many commercial circumstances, are being used for the profit of corporations at the expense of users. In addition, as more and more companies join the digital market, competition becomes fierce and methods are increasingly cunning in their design to capture and hold the attention of their users.

Colour Separations, Tony Curran's latest body of work, examines the capability printmakers have to create digitally generated false impressions – in other words, the dubious truthfulness of printmakers and their ability to convey the language of computers. These false impressions are a consistent trope in Curran's work: human interaction with facets of the digital realm.

The etching *Growth Potential #1,* which marks the beginning of this series, came about during a residency at the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery. Curran was invited to draw portraits of gallery visitors on an iPad, where one sitter, a baby who was around one-year old, was handed a mobile phone by their mother to keep them occupied, still and content while Curran drew. The experience of sitting in front of an infant unable to speak but able to become entirely engrossed in the device they held provoked reflection around the digital language and our devices' ability to control emotions. Titled *Attention Machines,* the works in *Colour Separations* explore this concept through colour, rigidity, form and placement in Curran's familiar visual language. This idiom captures the emotions generated by various digital pieces of stimulation and, in turn, creates a rudimentary analogue roadmap of its process.

Over the past decade Curran's practice has examined different intersections between digital artmaking, physical artmaking and the emotions generated when imagery reminiscent of the digital experience is translated into a physical format. For me, Tony's work playfully evokes the fable of the blind men describing an elephant. You see a line or shape that possibly reminds you of a single swipe on a touch-screen device, however, you're never presented with its full context. Curran transmogrifies his art through decontextualization and abstraction, giving one the feeling of familiarity and understanding, yet taking away viewers' ability to fully grasp the whole picture. As if we're supposed to deduce the entire elephant when only able to touch a hoof, tail or trunk.

Colour Separations presents works reminiscent of the patterns created when swiping or navigating touch-screen devices, presented digitally through rendered abstractions in RGB colourations and two emotions: hot and cold. These aesthetic motifs, which Curran describes as colours, wiggles and blobs, serve to represent digital culture in a simplistic visual form. The works utilise an entirely RGB colour palette, the building blocks of all digital colour. This facilitates the potential for capturing our attention either by hot excitement or by cool relaxation, similar to the colours and frequencies that occur on popular applications vying to immerse us.

These dopamine-driven feedback colours that Curran references are categorised by Tristan Harris, former product developer and design ethicist at Google, as a reinforcing weapon in the arsenal of companies that strive to keep users on their platforms. [iii] Likened to a slot machine, bright red tri-colour patterns excite the brain and blue dulcet colourations make users feel calm, relaxed and secure. These trigger a form of addiction or reliance on their consistent and predictable emotional reactions. Curran's work asks us to question whether this addiction is benign, or, as Shoshana Zuboff would suggest, negatively altering. If we are attracted or emotionally responsive to Curran's paintings, which hold no faithful visual representation or context, it confirms the latter through our conditioning of the stimulus he evokes.

Curran has explored the feeling that digital stimulation provokes in a number of past exhibitions, including *LOOP* in 2017 at galerie pompom. There, from digitally drawn portraits he selected brushstroke data which were then abstracted and used as the building blocks of physical oil paintings. The result was physical images that looked digital; familiar yet unrecognisable. The *Attention Machines* work in reverse. These artworks carry the physical notions of touch and sound but combine the colours and locations of digital excitement as if they were in a phone, app or computer.

Colour Separations translates Curran's digital language into the medium of print. The exhibition showcases works made in collaboration with etchings produced collaboratively with Cicada Press at UNSW, lithographs made with VCA Editions in Melbourne and screenprints and etchings made during an artist residency at Megalo Print Studio in Canberra.

Curran's collaborative approach draws from the legacy of Tyler Graphics and the 1960s context of photorealism where artists such as Chuck Close developed quasi-abstract artworks taken from photographic imagery through systematic grid processes. Limited to RGB colours, Curran's screenprints and experimental lithographs showcase the contemporary outcomes of printmaking through etching, lithography and screenprinting, seeking to assess the potentials and limitations of each of these traditional methods of reproduction.

Emerson Radisich
Acting Director | Exhibitions Coordinator
M16 Artspace, Canberra

[i] Maslow, A. H. 'A Theory of Human Motivation', 1943. *Psychological Review*, 50, 430-437.

[ii] Zuboff, S. *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power,* 2015. Cambridge University Press.

[iii] https://www.wired.com/story/our-minds-have-been-hijacked-by-our-phones-tristan-harris-wants-to-rescue-them/

Cool Attention Machine #1, 2020
Etching and aquatint, 24.7 x 21 cm (image)
Edition of 20, printed at Cicada Press, Sydney

List of works

1.   Dynamic Attention Machines   NFS
     2021
     Custom software on LED screens (diptych)

2.   Cool Attention Machine #2 $1,200.00 (unframed)
     2020 $1,780.00 (framed)*
     Etching and aquatint
     50 x 39 cm (image)
     Edition of 20
     Printed at Cicada Press, Sydney

3.   Synthetic hot and cool attention machine
     2020 $1,200.00 (unframed)
     Lithograph $1,780.00 (framed)*
     58.5 x 45.3 cm (image)
     Edition of 20
     Printed at VCA Editions, Melbourne

4.   Cool Attention Machine #7 $4,000.00
     2021
     Oil on linen
     122 x 97 cm

5.   Cool Attention Machine #4 $220.00 (unframed)
     2020 $550.00 (framed)*
     Etching and aquatint
     16.7 x 14.3 cm
     Edition of 20
     Printed at Cicada Press, Sydney

6.   Cool Attention Machine #1 $360.00 (unframed)
     2020 $690.00 (framed)*
     Etching and aquatint
     24.7 x 21 cm (image)
     Edition of 20
     Printed at Cicada Press, Sydney

7.   Cool Attention Machine #3 $360.00 (unframed)
     2020 $750.00 (framed)*
     Etching and aquatint
     24.5 x 21.5 cm (image)
     Edition of 20
     Printed at Cicada Press, Sydney

8.   Pixel in 12 #1 $400.00 each (unframed)
     2019
     Acrylic screenprint on BFK Rives
     38 x 28.7 cm
     Series of 12 unique state prints
     Printed at Megalo Print Studio, Canberra
     l-r: Pixel in 12 #1 (3 of 12)
            Pixel in 12 #1 (7 of 12)
            Pixel in 12 #1 (2 of 12)
            Pixel in 12 #1 (12 of 12)
            Pixel in 12 #1 (4 of 12)
            Pixel in 12 #1 (11 of 12)
            Pixel in 12 #1 (6 of 12)
            Pixel in 12 #1 (10 of 12)
            Pixel in 12 #1 (5 of 12)
            Pixel in 12 #1 (9 of 12)
            Pixel in 12 #1 (1 of 12)
            Pixel in 12 #1 (8 of 12)

9.   Pixel in 12 #2 $400.00 each (unframed)
        2019
        Acrylic screenprint on BFK Rives
        38 x 28.7 cm
        Series of 12 unique state prints
        Printed at Megalo Print Studio, Canberra
        l-r: Pixel in 12 #3 (9 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (12 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (8 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (7 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (3 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (1 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (2 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (11 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (10 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (6 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (4 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (5 of 12)

10.   Pixel in 12 #3 $400.00 each (unframed)
        2019
        Acrylic screenprint on BFK Rives
        38 x 28.7 cm
        Series of 12 unique state prints
        Printed at Megalo Print Studio, Canberra
        l-r: Pixel in 12 #3 (3 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (11 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (7 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (6 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (5 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (12 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (1 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (10 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (9 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (8 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (4 of 12)
                 Pixel in 12 #3 (2 of 12)

11.	Bright pixel 9 2020 Oil on linen 41 x 31 cm	$900.00
12.	Bright pixel 7 2020 Oil on linen 41 x 31 cm	$900.00
13.	Bright pixel 6 2020 Oil on linen 41 x 31 cm	$900.00
14.	Bright pixel 8 2020 Oil on linen 41 x 31 cm	$900.00
15.	Bright pixel 4 2020 Oil on linen 41 x 31 cm	$900.00
16.	Bright pixel 5 2020 Oil on linen 41 x 31 cm	$900.00

17. Growth Potential #1 $400.00 (unframed)
     2019 $850.00 (framed)*
     Etching and aquatint
     38.5 x 29.5 cm (image)
     Edition of 16
     Printed at Megalo Print Studio, Canberra

18. Signature #1 $20.00
     2020
     Artist book, digital print
     19.7 x 14.7 cm
     Edition of 100
     Printed at Throwdown Press, Sydney

*[All frames: Tasmanian oak, UV-resistant acrylic]

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Megalo acknowledges the Ngunnawal Nation as traditional custodians of this land
on which we stand, and we pay respect to the Elders past, present and emerging