

Circles/Light

An interview between Feral File and Rafaël Rozendaal ahead of the opening of his solo exhibition Infinite Entropy.

Is the piece “Infinite Entropy,” also the name of the exhibition, something that you created expressly for this show, or how did it come about?

I’d been making websites for 20 years, and I had so many domain names and server issues to manage that it stopped being fun. I liked making them, but I didn’t like publishing them. So I had a whole three years of unpublished works before NFTs came along, and all of a sudden it seemed to fit that very well.

This work in particular was something that I made for an exhibition called [Permanent Distraction](#) at Site Gallery in the UK. When the lockdown started, the exhibition was postponed for two years, and in the meantime we did an online exhibition. This work was published with some other works on the Site Gallery website, but it wasn’t in the final selection for Permanent Distraction. I kept playing with it and it never felt finished, but I think now it has really found its place.

This work has a softer composition than a lot of your other works. Why is that?

The way I think visually is with lines — it’s very simple, and very quick; it’s similar to drawing diagrams. But for this piece I was drawing circles, and though it’s still the simple instruction of a circle, I also added a level of transparency that I hadn’t used before. The content of the circle becomes transparent over the spreading out, the further you get from the center. As with all of my works, this one was made with a bunch of small steps — the transparency was just one of those small steps, but it creates a very different visual result.

With this piece I also wanted to play with the idea of emptiness and things being filled up and busy. There’s constantly a tension between where you feel like there’s some space and where it feels very crowded. The script is simple: it’s just these circles moving from the center outward, getting bigger. They’re not moving towards you, but there is a false sense of depth, like moving through clouds. I’ve always liked the kinds of paintings where you’re suggesting depth, but it’s barely there.

Do you place work like this in the tradition of Op Art? Or are there other foundations for this work?

It’s strange because my work started as more figurative and slowly became abstract. I appreciate Op Art now more than before, but it was never a big thing on my radar. I was thinking more about Pre War Abstraction. In a Bridget Riley painting, for example, that sort of hard edge painting is quite difficult, but in code it’s the simplest thing you can do. It might look the same, but in terms of working method, there are way more advanced media artists that can create really complex, rich, and much more dense work than I do. My aesthetic comes from more of a punk mindset: it’s usually a very straightforward, direct idea — like, power cord, right there, boom. So to me, my work is closer to the Ramones than to Bridget Riley.

I see a lot of historical references in your work. Do you feel that you’ve been more influenced by the history of experimental animation, or music, or that of Pre War Abstraction? Or all of them?

My dad is an abstract geometric painter, so it would be me with the TV on in the living room and him in his studio making abstract paintings. I see my work as somewhere between Looney Tunes/Mickey Mouse and Malevich/Mondrian.

Growing up in the Netherlands, the museum collections there go back very far and they haven’t collected as much American abstraction. In Europe, it was like Malevich and Mondrian did everything. It’s almost unthinkable to do anything in abstraction because it just looks like Mondrian. He is such a hero there. After coming to the U.S., it was quite liberating to find out that abstraction doesn’t end with the black square — that was the beginning. I didn’t know Ad Reinhardt, or Agnes Martin, or even Bridget Riley, at least in depth.

Being in New York gave me the chance to really see all the subtleties of abstraction. It made me much more relaxed to keep experimenting and do small steps.

When you go to MoMA, is there one favorite work that you visit every time?

I’ve always loved the soup cans, even as a kid. There’s such a blending of idea and form. I talk to a lot of people about whether art should be conceptual/rational or more intuitive/visual. I think with Warhol’s work, especially his early work, all sides are there. There’s the formal idea of repetition, but also the connection to the world he lived in

at the time — there's a sense of humor there that I really love. It's the kind of work that once you see it, you realize there's more to it than just the idea.

You call “Infinite Entropy” a “liquid composition” because it adapts to any screen size and resolution. Is there an ideal display for it?

I try to make works that could potentially function anywhere: it could be on a big monitor, it could be in a football stadium, it could be on the side of a building, or it could be on an Apple watch. With NFTs, a lot of people ask, “what is the perfect home or display?” But I always wanted to make works where there is no perfect display, the displays evolve and the work evolves with it.

The internet doesn't have a fixed size, so it's a very strange medium. I remember when I was starting out with code, I asked my teacher how big a website is. He was like, “well, it depends on the user.” And I thought, that's an interesting problem.

That's a core value and strength of the internet, that it's so malleable. I always saw the website not as a fixed thing but as an idea or set of instructions that can then adapt to any space. That's a core value of web design, but it's also a value of conceptual art, that it is idea driven and that it can adapt itself to different exhibition spaces. Formally, a website should be able to stretch itself out and fill up a space, but also, the way I intuitively make websites is that there's not really a duration: you can look at them for a few seconds or for the whole day. The internet is a place of distraction, but also sometimes a place of contemplation.

You've been releasing your work online to run in web browsers as a form of public art since the early 2000s. Last year, you started creating NFTs. How are these two ways of releasing work similar and different?

As a net artist, I really cared about doing things fast and saying, “this is the way I want it, I'm not going to think about anybody.” Then boom, it was published. With NFTs it has been a bit of a collaborative process, and it's also been a process of making it work and then maybe letting it sit for a year and a half, then getting some new ideas and adding to it. There's a depth of research that is new for me, and I think that really adds to the final experience. A lot of my work has become better after I let them sit for a while. Now that this piece has 25 permutations, it feels finished.

What I really love about these permutations is that they make programming tangible. Showing an algorithm do a number of different results, comparing those results, and attaching value to those results makes people look more intently and question the differences between the choices. That is one of the most interesting parts of NFTs. I had always made exhibitions where people see the end result of a journey. Before, you could tell someone “this is programmed,” and they could understand it, but they didn't really feel it. Now they can feel it.

Another interesting thing about NFTs is that there's a new audience that is code literate first, and then is learning about art — not the other way around. For me, exhibiting art has always been to an art-first audience, which doesn't necessarily understand the details of code and how things are built. One of the things I've really appreciated about the NFT community is the feedback I get from people who understand code and have this sort of material-first way of looking at the work. So NFTs not only offer a distribution format that fits me, but it seems that people in the NFT world really appreciate formal abstract work and visual research.

In the early net art days, in the mid-1990s, it was such a breakthrough for artists that you could share your artwork without any intermediary, with anybody who has a network connection. I think that ability has been lost over time, but it feels like we're back there again with NFTs.

In many other parts of culture — with music, for instance, it's normal to be able to discover David Bowie and then dive into his catalog and listen to all his albums immediately. But with art, if you've just discovered Ad Reinhardt and you want to see all his work, good luck. You might see one painting in person, that's the way it is with physical works. I felt very limited by that. I really enjoy going down that rabbit hole, and I've always loved the idea that with net art you can experience the work and it's not just documentation.

I think for a long time net artists understood that everyone's eyeballs are on the internet, on the screen; that's where the art happens. But then slowly the internet became more like entertainment. Then Artforum got an Instagram feed, and eventually it went back to, “well, it's not art until it's on Artforum's Instagram feed.” I never liked that hierarchy. But I think now things are changing again, and we're slowly starting to admit that our eyes are on the screen. Let's accept that that's a genuine experience.

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“Infinite Entropy” is a series of 25 unique works, each one with its own colors, rhythm, and scale. The script is relatively simple: colorful circles drift from the center of the composition outward, getting bigger as they go. The dense concentration of color at the center of each circle gets more transparent as the circle spreads, creating a

soft halo that gives the piece a layered, fuzzy feel. The overall effect is quite different from Rafael Rozendaal's usual harder-edged works, though the process of building it from simple shapes and small steps is the same. The circles look as if they're moving toward the viewer, implying depth where there is none.

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