

# ON PLEIN AIR



RICK SILVA'S *EN PLEIN AIR* @ TRANSFER GALLERY  
AN ESSAY BY NICHOLAS O'BRIEN

RICK SILVA'S *En Plein Air* is an ongoing work – a statement that holds in multiple respects. At face value, this work is a continual series of sketches when assembled and compiled together make for a substantial work. But this series is also a collection of methodologies that speak to previous projects that work in similar ways. The long-term series is a common tendency within Silva's practice seen in previous projects like *Antlers Wifi*, as well as his collaborative work with Jimpunk and Mr. Tamales (done under the moniker Abe Lincoln). However, the difference from these works and *En Plein Air* is how Silva uses the blog model to reflect on digital production under the influence of a larger art historical context. In doing so, this series marks a decisive moment for Silva in its attempt to tackle issues of the studio and the screen.

The process of short-term posting over long-term compilation suits its maker. Not only does it allow for frequent iterations and expressions, but also for extended investment and exploration. The complimentary nature of this process also allows Silva to operate not only in an intuitive fashion, but also permits a methodological exploration of content and ideas in a way that image blogs rarely achieve. By sidestepping the desire to contribute to immediately gratifying image-blogging – yet maintaining that framework of digital distribution – Silva's output appeals to many different kinds of digital art enthusiasts. Far from pandering to a variety of audiences, Silva's work is rare in its decisive and distinct look and feel.

This balancing act between somewhat divergent models of production is reflected in the work itself. *En Plein Air* exemplifies Silva's ability to delicately harmonize aesthetically pleasing imagery and conceptually rich works. Although individual pieces within this series can stand alone as completed animations, the depth of the work can only come through sustained practice. Working in a series not only creates a routine for Silva's practice, but it also importantly exposes a timeline of development and experimentation. As a result of Silva's ability to balance between the dichotomies and demands of an online studio, his work can easily be considered one of the preeminent voices and visionaries within contemporary digital art.

An element of this equilibrium can be found in how *En Plein Air* takes cues from both art history and recent trends in online art production. The project takes its title from the long-standing tradition of Romantic and Impressionist landscape painters taking their easel and canvas out into nature and working directly from observation. Artists such as Claude Monet would try to complete most of their work out in the field during daylight hours and then take their work back to the studio to polish, stylize, and finish. These artists would revisit sites multiple times, creating seasonal interpretations of a site (perhaps most famously done by Monet in his Haystack series). It is in this mode that Silva situates this work, creating a sense of concentrated time to a particular landscape in order to understand it in a more personally rich way.

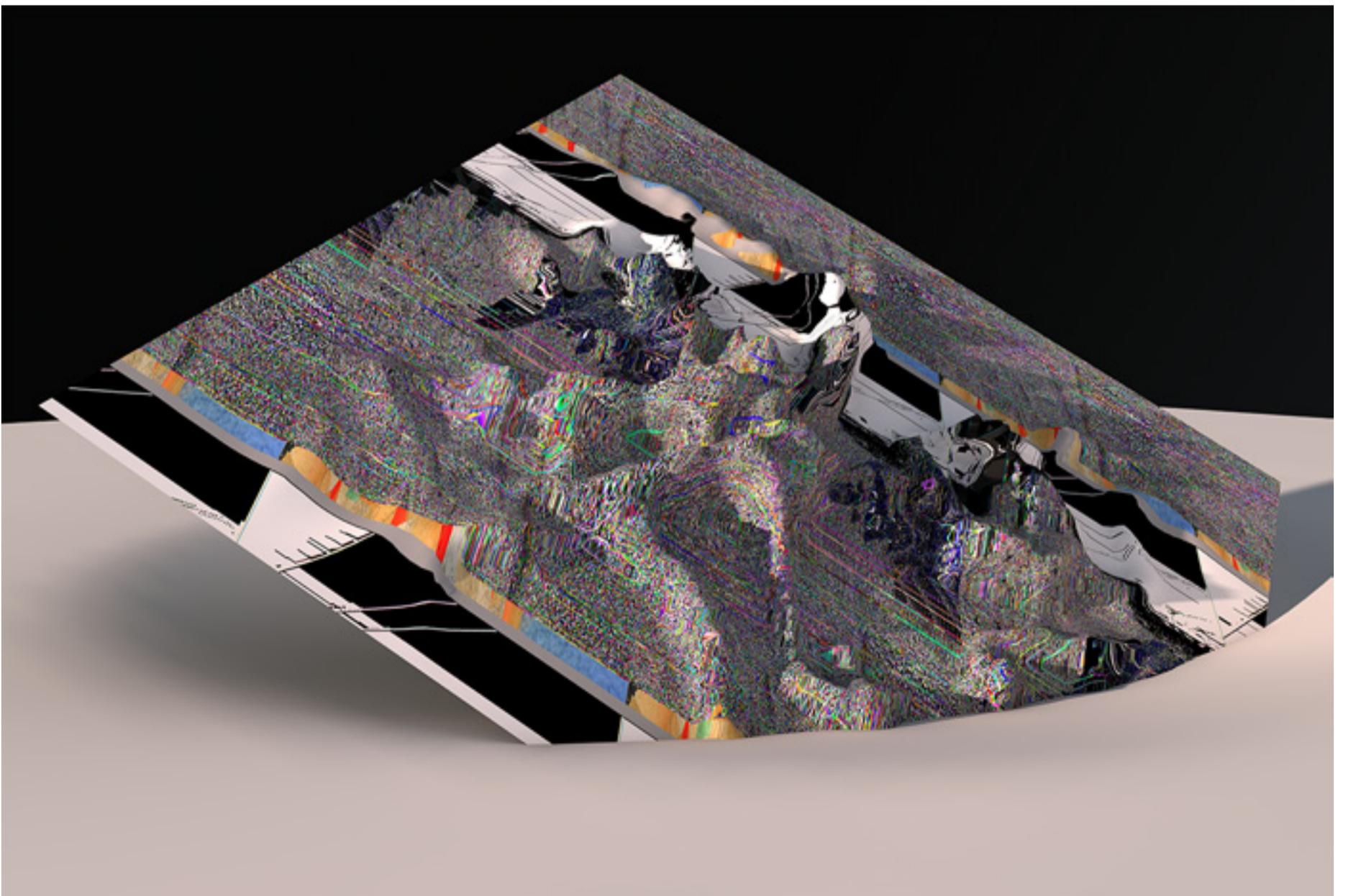
Other art historical points of departure also play prominent roles in Silva's oeuvre. In previous projects, Silva has repeatedly referenced the influence of experimental analog video and avant-garde cinema. Two of Silva's works in particular come to mind: *Colorful Colorado Remix*, and *Le Région Decentralized*. Both pieces, referencing Phil Morton and Michael Snow respectively, use recent art history as a kind of conceptual source material for discussing the ways that the digital has advanced – or complicated – moving-image work in the 21st century. For Silva, these works act simultaneously as “homage and argument,” a gesture he borrows from Stan Brackage's response to Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

Interestingly, both Morton and Snow's work also take their cues from *plein air* painting. The majority of Morton's *Colorful Colorado* and Snow's *La Région Central* are produced “out in the field,” or else immersed in the natural landscape. Hyperlinking these recent influences to both the 19th century and to the current digital practices within *En Plein Air* shows a confident maturity in Silva's practice that few other digital makers possess (or even attempt to broach).

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Claude Monet, *The Haystacks, End of Summer, Giverny, 1891*. (Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/ART RESOURCE, N.Y.)



Rick Silva, 3/18/2012 *Glenbow Ranch Provincial Park, near Cochrane, Alberta. 5 pm. 39° f, 2012.*

Continuing in these traditions, Silva hikes out into the wilderness with his laptop and creates sketches of the landscape, some of which – like their historical counterparts – have to be fully rendered upon return to the studio. Each sketch is then marked with a specific time-and-weather-stamp – specifying the particular physical conditions of these digital interpretations. Without these indications, one could easily observe *En Plein Air* as a compilation of anonymous locations. But for Silva, the insistence to locate these sketches – regardless of our ability to identify any specific physical attribute of these sites – is an important step in mapping personal identification with these locations. In other words: *En Plein Air* is not merely a series of landscape sketches, but is a diary of Silva's transition from treks in Alberta to hikes in his recently adopted home state of Oregon. To that end, Silva suggests that a significant aspect of this work is that these places – like the locations found within a *plein air* tradition – are directly linked to the local environment of the artist.

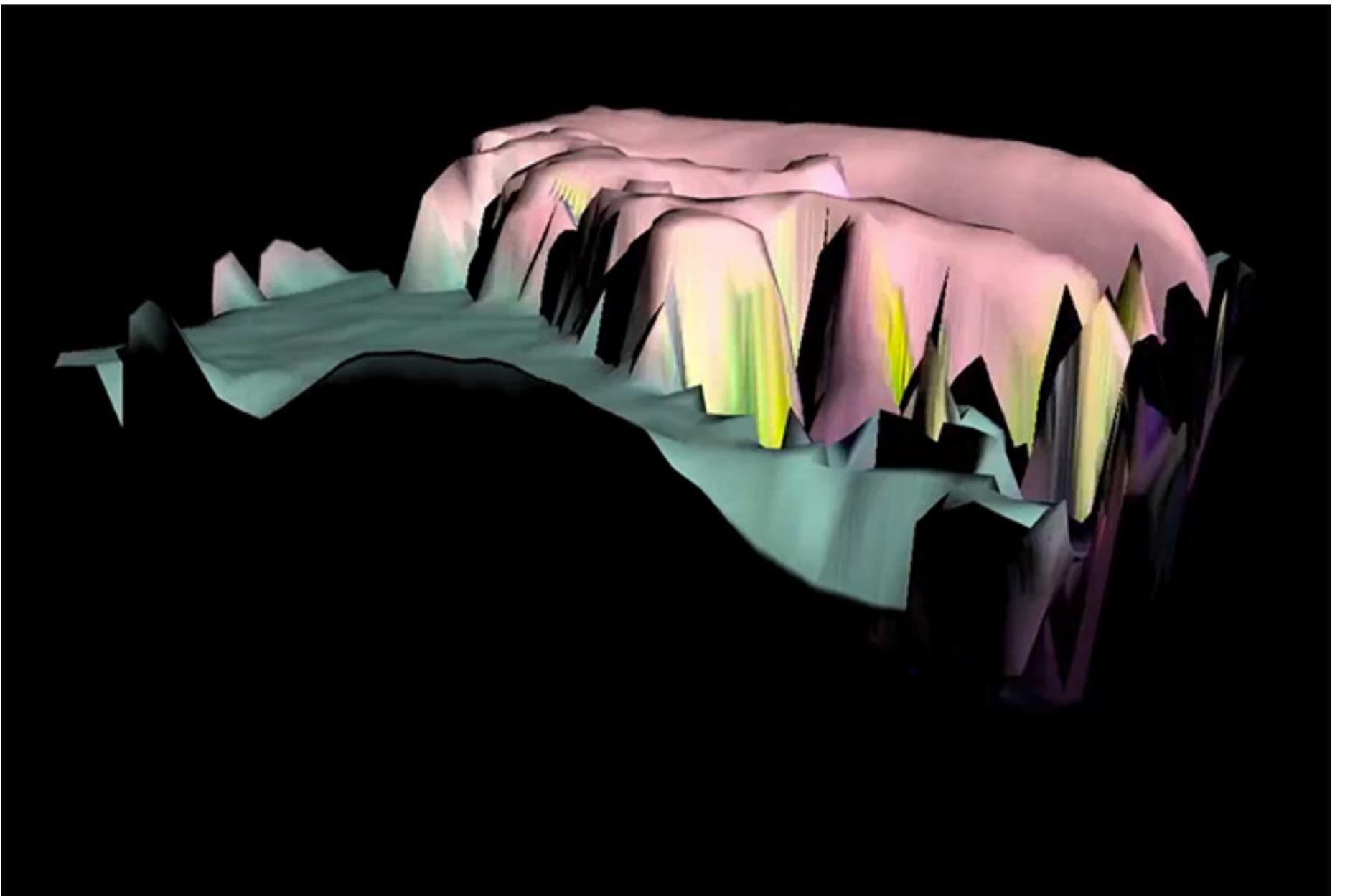


Rick Silva at work in Banff National Park, Alberta, Canada.

However, the following of tradition in these works takes dramatic visual and conceptual turns away from the standards of fine art when applied to Silva's digital context. Unlike the static canvases of John Singer Sargent, the represented landscapes of the artist's surroundings are frequently fragmented, porous, or unstable. Within Silva's short animated cycles, a disorienting sense of scale destabilizes and confounds the standard notions of perspective and physics familiar to Impressionist painters. Normally craggy surfaces are smoothed; rainclouds are substituted with rectangular points of origin; hillsides are rendered in wireframe. Upon compounding these gestures, Silva conceives of his own unique visual language for understanding a new digital landscape. This landscape does not seek to find stability in the familiar, but instead aims to work through the abstract to excavate another layer of metaphorical sediment from the bedrock of landscape art.



Rick Silva, still from *La Région Decentralized*, 2012.



Phil Morton, still from *Colorful Colorado* (Rick Silva's 2011 Remix). 2011.

This being said, the malleability of these spaces is not merely a “new twist” on the grand narrative of landscape representation. Instead, it is a reflection on the studio itself. Where canonical Impressionists poured over masterpieces in stereotypical hovels and turpentine-laden shacks, Silva goes to the nearest Wi-Fi connection to complete his works. As a result, Silva’s landscapes act as a contemplative comment on the *plein air* of his time. Through highlighting the shortened physical and psychological distance between the field and the studio via mobile technology, this work delicately ruminates on the collapse of a technology/nature dichotomy. Although some might see a terrifying complexity in this disintegration, Silva sees the potential for a nuanced meditative aesthetic. The intersection of the terrible and the awesome is the sublime location where Silva’s work has seeded and matured.

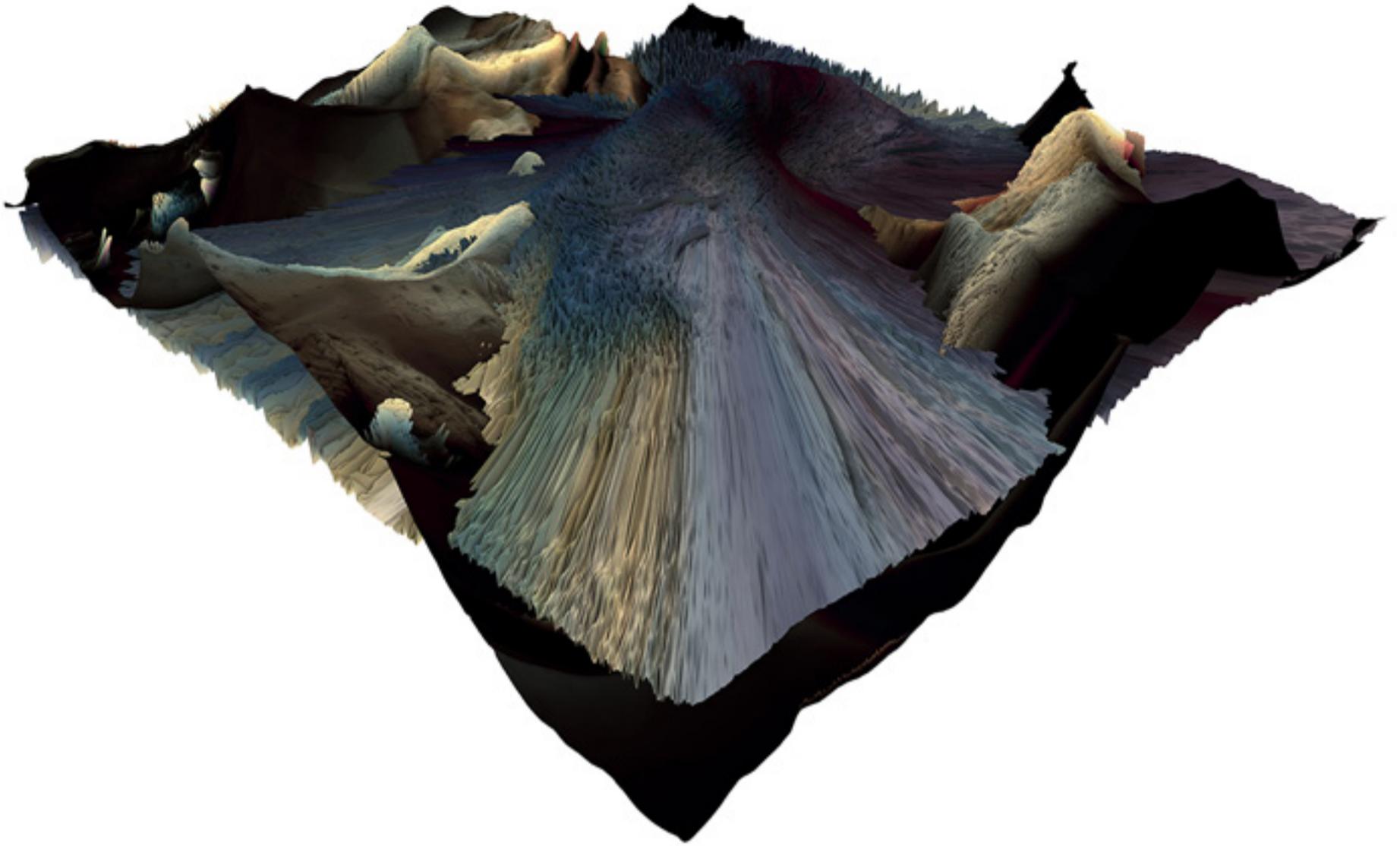
With this in mind, a central question arises: what happens in this shortened transition between landscape and studio? What occurs when the sublime is amplified with the immediacy of digital technology? Does the quickness of this transition demand a certain aesthetic? One could argue that the infrastructure of mobile technology necessitates a certain kind of visual metaphor that guides Silva’s practice. Packet-switching protocols engender a landscape interrupted; streaming technology makes for buffering creeks; P2P networks prompt seeded trees. Through a playful and critical adoption of default landscape generating tools, Silva’s work addresses the ways in which software enhances (and occasionally dictates) the ways we recreate the natural through our screens. Although the adaptation of presets within 3D modeling tools makes possible the quickness of these sketches, it also advances Silva’s desire for subversion.

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Within *En Plein Air*, a certain criticality unfolds over the course of the project by observing the ways in which Silva pushes his tools to their aesthetic limit. Through the maxing out variables and geometry crunching techniques Silva questions the functional value of these shortcuts. While software and simulation claim to have reduced

landscape to a sequence of topographical polygons, Silva aims to break these chains apart in order to tap into the hidden possibilities of these defaults. In doing so, the visual remnants of these stressed landscapes create unexpected compositions of physical impossibility. In these environments, however, we still see suggestions of the places in which they are attempting to portray: a hint of grey on a cloudy day; the reflective surface of a still lake; the subtle slope of a nearby hilltop. In these evocations, Silva’s artistic hand emerges and guides us through an otherwise out-of-the-box menagerie. Again, a negotiation permeates these works: one that tempers the immediacy of preset variables with the complexity of laborious hand crafted animation.

The deftness with which Silva deals with the aesthetic and conceptual concerns of landscape and digital technology mark him as a trailblazer of new approaches for representing nature. His ability to conscientiously float between seemingly disparate working methodologies separates Silva from other contemporaries working within digital art. This gift of steadiness, directness, and a seemingly effortless simplicity not only distinguishes Silva within a specific digital discipline, but situates him as a timely and refreshing voice within the broader discourse of contemporary art.



Rick Silva, 6/8/2012 Athabasca Glacier, Columbia Icefield, Alberta. 2 pm. 47° f, 2012.

Rick Silva, *En Plein Air*

On view at Transfer Gallery, Brooklyn, NY  
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Essay by Nicholas O'Brien

