



Ernest Edmonds: Artist

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Ernest Edmonds has an unusual track record as a practising artist and a pioneer of computer art. He was born in London and having been deterred from studying art formally at school and by other artists, decided to study Mathematics on the grounds that as he found it easy he would have more time for painting. He first used computers in his art practice in 1968 while working as a computer science lecturer at Leicester Polytechnic. In 1970, he first showed an interactive work with Stroud Cornock and in 1985, a generative time-based computer artwork at Exhibiting Space in London. Although a very active practitioner from the 1960s, his art was barely mentioned in the field in which he worked. Today Ernest is well known as a major contributor to the development of computational art. His work represents an important landmark in the field of generative and interactive art. The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, holds some of his artwork and is collecting his archives within the National Archive of Computer Based Art and Design. That pioneering work has been recognised by the Association of Computing Machinery in 2017 with the Lifetime Achievement Award for the Practice of Computer Human Interaction. This was complemented by the 2017 SIGGRAPH Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement in Digital Art, demonstrating the breadth of both art and computing. He has exhibited his work in across the world from Moscow, Riga, Leicester, Rotterdam to Beijing and Sydney, most recently in Venice as part of a major exhibition of computer artists including Manfred Mohr, Vera Molnar, Frieder Nake and Roman Verotkso.

Although Ernest is involved in a number of collaborations with other artists, musicians and technologists, he works alone for the most part, on the very basics of human perception in simple forms in bold colours that aim to create heightened perceptual awareness. When asked to talk about his life time of creative practice, he felt he was at an important moment when ideas and intentions that had been there from his beginnings as an artist were now coming to fruition. He felt he been through major changes in his art work and through many years of practice, had garnered sufficient experience so that now he felt that everything was manifestly coming together. He considers that reflection is an essential part of being an artist and whilst not every artist would use the phrase, they must all reflect both during the process of making as well as afterwards. Reflection, he thinks, works best when you understand your process well enough to learn from it and do it differently next time.

There are many articles written by and about Ernest Edmonds¹. The artwork both interactive and non-interactive and his extensive set of writings appear on line².

Interview

Q: At what point are you in your 'career'? - if I can use that word.

E: Many of the ideas and intentions that I have had are beginning to come to fruition. I am at an important point. I feel that I may have gathered enough understanding and experience to make some bigger steps in progressing my 'career' to use that word. I think that the moments of change that I have been conscious of in the past, have usually been moments where I have had an idea to do something new or different or a realisation that there was some way of

progressing what I was trying to do that I hadn't seen before, whereas now I am not feeling that I am on the brink of a step in that sense so much but more a unifying moment.

Q: Do you have sense for why it's different from previous experience?

E: I think that the moments of change that I have been conscious of in the past, have usually been moments where I have had an idea to do something new or different or a realisation that there was some way of progressing what I was trying to do that I hadn't seen before- like steps; whereas now I am not feeling that I am on the brink of a step in that sense so much but more a unifying moment.

Q: How does an idea for a new work take hold, start up? What's the seed?

E: Often an existing work is the seed for a new work. Contemplating something I have already done is very often the trigger for thinking of the next work I want to do. There are quite different ways in which this might work so for instance, I might think well I could just do that better. I could make a variation that would be more interesting than what I have just done: making a variation but not making a fundamental change. But then there are moments when I think well actually I could do something quite different based on that. Take an example from quite a long time ago when I was doing particular structured works and I suddenly realised I could make time-based pieces, which I could do using the same concepts and structures but adding time which was a complete transformation, not a variation in any sense.

Q: Can you explain how you get started?

E: I can certainly say that my work is concerned with exploring perception or perceptual issues...of engaging the audience in interesting perceptual experiences. When I say interesting, I mean they can be anything from puzzling to spiritual, uplifting. To do this, I have very deliberately looked at the very basics of perception and how perception affects us. The works are extremely simple on the surface...that's to say the geometric forms are very simple, usually stripes and squares for example, not as complicated as a rectangle or curves. They often are full of plain areas of colour, they sometimes change in time; they sometimes change as a result of the action of the audience. But they are concerned with almost challenging the perception of colour, for example using very close hues sometimes, that would be very challenging to some people. You get these tests on the Internet, you must have seen them, where you are asked can you see the difference between these colours and you find many people can't and some can. You get this level of distinction which is not necessarily universal... I try to work in an area where, colour blindness apart, most people would see the differences.

Q: What do you say to yourself about whether you like what you see? How do you judge it?

E: For example, is there a sense of symmetry or asymmetry in the work? How good does this work 'feel'? What characteristics can I see? And if I put it next to another work that is not quite so successful, what is the difference? And typically, asymmetry is more interesting. I've done a work recently where there is an odd piece or square that feels a bit out of the rest, which is a deliberate ploy, right at the bottom...the question is 'is that a good place for it? Is it a disturbing or interesting effect being there or does it draw attention away from everything else? I am looking for the characteristics of a work, having made it, that contribute towards what I perceive as its quality.

For each work, there is a different set of criteria because one wants to make different works, so to be banal, you might want to make works that have different moods - one that is sad, one that is joyous. They would have different characteristics obviously so you don't have a single set of criteria - which part of the colour circle you are in is different. But given that you choose to do something in a particular way, or are drawn towards something particular, then you can start to apply the criteria, and maybe selecting the criteria almost makes the work: but there are some kinds of things, like pure symmetry, that are very difficult. That's not to say

you can't make a great work that is purely symmetrical- you can but it is a difficult concept to work with and tends to look banal.

Q. What happens when things do not work out as you planned?

E: Probably to look hard and make coffee...pace about...for example, I am in the middle of some paintings where, instead of using four canvasses, if you like four elements from a sequence, I am putting those four images on a single canvas which is going back to something I did in the 90s with prints and on the screen. Whereas with the four separate canvasses, the fact you have four tells you that there are four elements and they are distinct, you can put them near to one another etc., but however you do that you have still got these four things even if you screw them together it is still quite clear you have four things. But when you put those four images on a single canvas, suddenly it becomes one thing and it is much more difficult to retain this notion of four elements from an infinite sequence... I made one like this and used a black as a background to the four images and I used a particular width around the edge so the images were within the canvass. There was a reason for that because if you put the four images touching the edge, but you separate them in the middle, you have got like a cross, and that cross becomes the image, the thing you see most in a way.

..it becomes the focus of attention so that doesn't work. If you have the four images actually touching one another, you don't see them as four. The next possibility is you have them separated and you have the width of that separation bar round the edge as well which is one thing I've tried but when I did that somehow the black window came about.

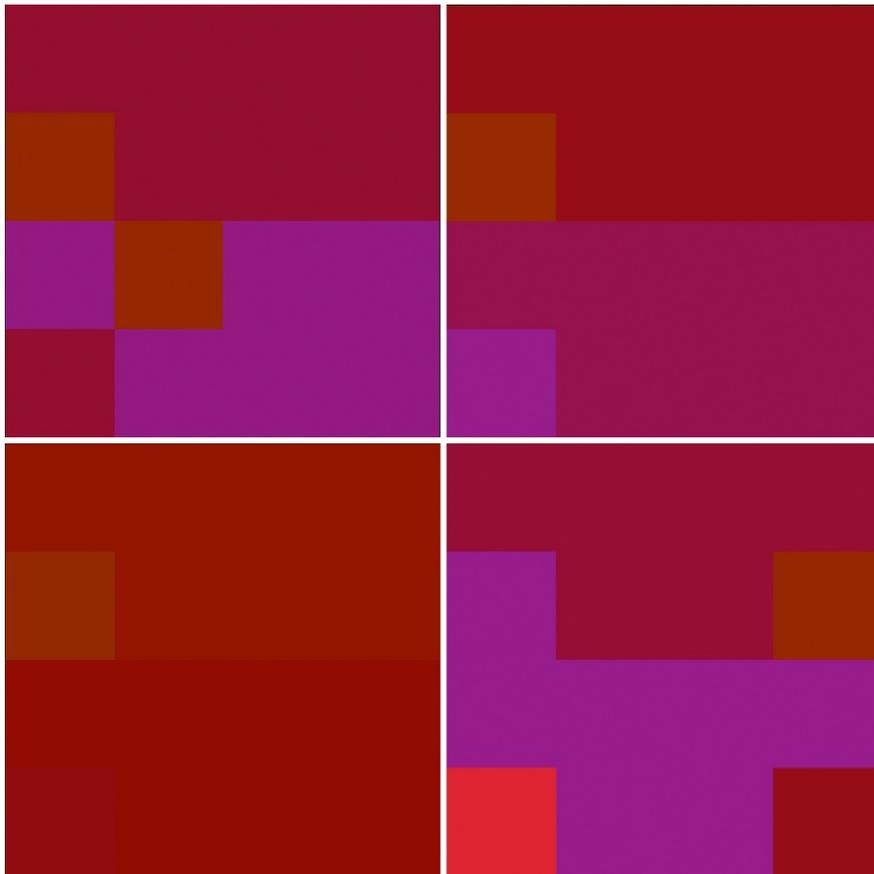
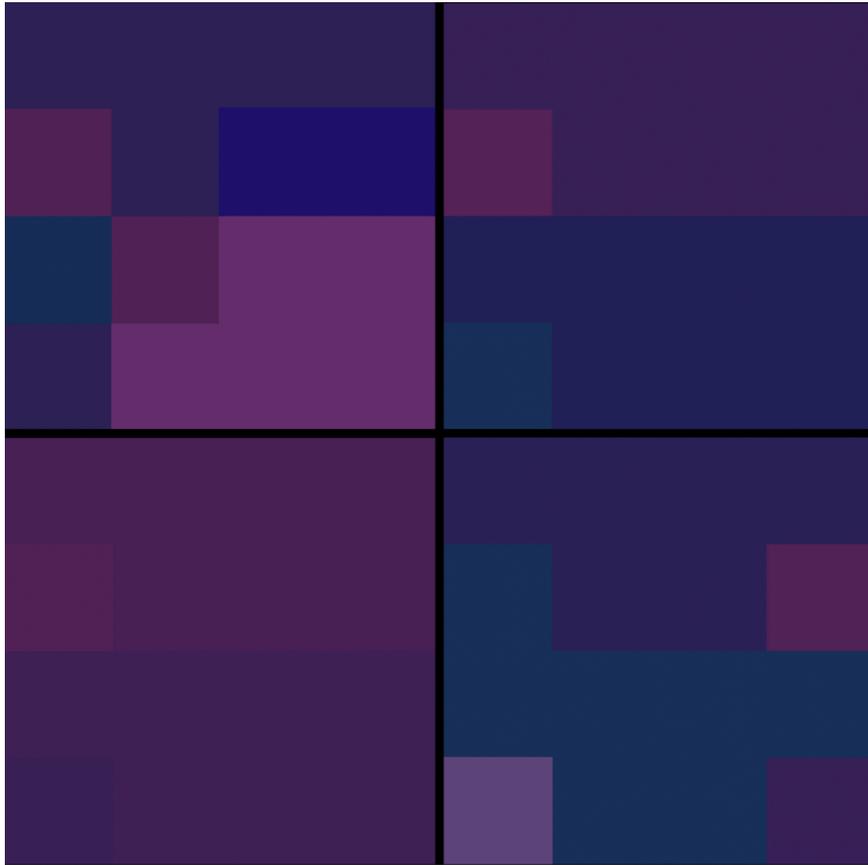


Figure 1: Ernest Edmonds, “Four Shaped Forms (Park Hill)”, 2014, 300x300cm, Digital print and acrylic on canvas. © Ernest Edmonds



**Figure 2: Ernest Edmonds, “*Shaped Forms 4PH*”, 2014, 100x100cm, Digital print on aluminium
© Ernest Edmonds**

Q: Would you say that something has taken a wrong turning of some kind?

E: I hadn't expected it. Now I am thinking I have already described to you some things that don't work and I can describe it in words that you can understand ... now what do I do about this? The only way is to experiment with some possibilities. I can say maybe this would work. Maybe if the outer boundary was not the width of the bar in the middle but was much bigger, more of order of or related to the size of the four images themselves. It began a field in which these things floated. Now, if you think about it, I am starting to explore something which I hadn't conceived in the first place at all.

Q. What does the phrase “reflective practice” mean to you?

E: To me it means thinking about, or being aware, of the way that you do things as you do them with a view to possibly changing tack ... by coming across the fact that this didn't work as well as I had hoped and I had approached it in this way and by reflecting on being aware of how I had approached it I might be more able to approach it another way.

Q Can you talk about reflection without it being rational?

E: This is a point I was going to put back to you. What do we mean by reflection? It seems to me that we probably mean something that is linguistic, that is put into words whether spoken or written. But if you never put it into words, could you call it reflection? Would you want to

call it reflection? I am inclined to think that reflection means coming to some kind of linguistic description of something.

Q: Do you reflect in the moment or after you have done something?

E: I do both actually. But I suppose the reflection in action is a very interesting thing to see where it is applied because it might be that it tells you where the core creative work is taking place maybe. The example I gave was on seeing the results.

Q: Does it ever happen when you are actually in the middle of painting?

E: Sometimes I am doing a digital print of colour and then what my painting consists of is getting the colours how I want them or discovering how they should be is a more accurate way of putting it because I don't have a pre-judged notion of what I want- it's a discovery process. The 'in action' process is largely mixing colours...what I do is I have the canvass on the floor and I have masking tape to get the edges right and I put masking tape down and I mix colours and I paint on the masking tape so I put the colour that I am thinking of putting on the canvass, onto the making tape so I can see that colour almost where it's about to go. It isn't perfect but this is a step and you can get rid of lots of options straightaway...so 'that is not going to work and I need to put a little more blue in it' or something, or maybe I can see its too dark, needs to be a bit lighter. Then the next step is now I think I am going to commit to this one. Now I have, for the sake of argument one square masked off and I lay down this colour on that square. Now there is another kind of reflection: because when it is dry enough, because the kind of paint I use dries quite quickly, we are talking minutes not hours. Now I remove the masking tape and look at it...and think 'well actually that didn't work after all.' And 'though I thought it was going to be perfect it has definitely got a little too much blue in it.'

You have these pots with different colours and you go to a pot and take something out. There has to be a judgment, I want a bit of red or something. I think I am conscious of the fact that the colour seems to need a bit more. I recently looked back at a painting I made in 1965, 50 years old. I am pretty happy with the colours I mixed for that painting. But I am pushing the boundaries of what I am trying to do all the time.

Q: What does pushing the boundaries mean here?

E: I am trying to heighten the effect, to create more heightened sensations- I am paraphrasing Cezanne in saying that...always pushing further and further in the visual sensation for anyone looking at it, first of all me looking at it.

Another point on reflection I should make. I am also reflecting on the whole process I am using of printing and painting so I am also thinking of how I came to have this canvass with these particular colours printed on it. At the back of my mind I am thinking, well next time I might do that earlier stage differently. I can think of an example of a series of things I did where I did this a few times and what I found in this particular sequence and what I found was that as I progressed I made less modifications of the colours printed on the canvas than when I started, which meant that that earlier part of the process was redefined more to my satisfaction. There is more than one layer of reflection going on here.

It seems as if the process has to be good as well as the product although it's the product that matters. One reason we tend to like having clear clean good processes is that it does enable more learning, more reflection on the process - the more messy the process is, the less opportunity there is to reflect on it and refine.

Q: Is being a reflective practitioner a natural or learned way to be.

E: I discovered it as a way forward. I started being reactive to the paint, not reflective and that's when it was very difficult and mostly it doesn't work. I discovered that the more I could be reflective the more I learned. The point about the other way is that you never progress

really. You keep on doing the same thing... but reflection offered to me a way of learning and progressing and doing better work – not better but more interesting and rewarding. That slowed me down because I made less works and spent more time thinking about it or even not thinking about it but having it at the back of my head and not all the time pushing paint about hoping it would work. I am not saying you can't make good art, it's just hard graft. Essential you react to the materials or the context, the paint and you are grappling with the medium which is quite enjoyable when it works because you do this and you discover it looks good - discovery is a much bigger part of that kind of art making.

I suppose one thing I found was that as I started to be more reflective I could see that what I had been doing before was getting a reward in the making process and somehow being an artist was all about pushing the paint about, not the paintings. It was almost as if kneading the clay was more important than making the pot. It was as if the outcome was less important. I became more interested in finding out about making art that really worked, to learn how to make.

Q: Do you look for surprises?

E: No but some people do. Spill paint to see what happens. I think I've got enough surprises and difficulties without looking for them.

Q: Do you look for challenges?

E: Oh yes. I am always making it more difficult. I am always looking for something that is challenging to myself. I am more interested in aesthetically difficult. technically difficult not so interesting. The challenge I am working on is working towards open systems scheme and it's dealing with the aesthetic of things. The challenge is what you see going on in different screens and the questions are things like should the images be treated like continuous space? What kind of aesthetic experience am I going for?

Q: What do you want people to feel? Do you have an aesthetic of that kind?

E: Yes I do and I suppose the grabbing spiritual experience is what I am usually going for.

Q: How do you recognize success – in your creative process? In your outcomes?

E: I know much more about organising visual material towards creating sensations. That organisation is in a number of respects- it's colour and form primarily and to a lesser extent but important sense, time. But I don't think I've learnt enough about time to say it matches what I know about colour and form. The more I have learnt the more I can talk about it. I want to add another thing- interaction- between audience and the artwork. Interaction as a property of the artwork and viewer. Although I identified it, started to work on it, 45 years ago I still feel I am beginning. It is quite difficult. But I am interested to pursue it further.

The fundamental measure of success any artist would say is when they look at their work how do they feel about it? To me the reflection is essential. It is not an added extra that makes everything better. The whole thing is a life-long quest and if you don't reflect on what you are doing and how you do it, I can't see anyway that life quest is progressing. I can't believe that any artist worth their salt doesn't spend a lot of time reflecting. I throw away works- this was a reflection on what had been done. As I moved from 50 paintings a year, and throwing away 45 to ten paintings a year, I looked back on it and found I kept the same number 5 or 6. Obviously my reflection was leading to a better prediction of what was going to work. I didn't produce any more that were any good.

¹ Francesca Franco (2017). Edmonds and Franco (2017)

² www.ernestedmonds.com.

