



# ALEX FISCHER



© Bluenose, 2011 ◀ The Infant and The Garden Hose, 2011 ▶

# ADAPTATIONS

by Rachel Anne Farquharson

*“The more our world is rendered forth in visual images, the more things are left unexpressed”*  
— Laura U. Marks

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The responsibility of the artist is a topic often eschewed in contemporary discourse, despite art’s continuous and critical role in the homeostasis of society. If art is neither a mirror of reality nor a proponent of ideology, then perhaps it is time to question why humans have felt the need to maintain expressive forms. Current work by artists like Olafur Eliasson and Bridget Riley reveal a link between a deep mutation of civilization and the insemination of our material and spiritual lives with advanced technologies, creating a useful context for the exploration of an artist’s psycho-sociological commitment.

The solitary nature of Toronto artist **Alex Fischer**’s computer-based practice is attenuated by the pool of images that are his muse: his procedural culling from the digital

archive that is the “world wide web” refreshes the appropriative art modes that peppered the last half of the 20th century but does not rehearse them. Perhaps this is because Fischer startles his audience — his digital images are imbued with greater texture than the eye can comprehend, the impact of which spills over into other sense perceptions. As with the artist’s earliest experiments, his recent production has continued to reconcile two concepts that are seemingly opposed: technological progress and the bio-spiritual survival of mankind. His goal is to stimulate the temporal imagination, inciting his audience to visualize and spatialize a new social order in the future.

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Interview conducted July, 2012

**You have suggested that you aim to represent the prominent influence of the internet on daily inter and intra-personal behaviours. Can you describe your conception of zeitgeist and why you feel it is an artist’s responsibility to deliver it to their audience through creative media?**

To me, the conception of zeitgeist should not exceed an empiricist understanding. I think media itself is the spirit of our time, and it must be measured in some way. My contention here is based on how I see people interacting online and what information I find there, which currently reveals that computer and cell phone sales are through the roof. Digital images were made yet more predominant in our lives when we all sat down to look at screens every day, dictating the way we interact with each other. My evaluation is statistical but when I say empiricist, I really mean it is based on sense experience — how we “sense” the world these days.

Artists are granted the luxury of being everyday philosophers without having to exist in academia or other bureaucracies. It is a personal responsibility to visualize our zeitgeist because artists have the time to contemplate the world and reflect upon the relationships that exist between people and things. It is a very exciting time in art — I don’t have to uphold Modernist ideals, but can put into my work whatever I deem important.



① *Paradise*, 2011 ▲

**Your work seems to embody the cultural dissatisfaction with the limits of visibility. We want to be able to “see” more, and not only through the avenue of optical faculties.**

We definitely have a dissatisfaction with the limits of visibility today. Our brains evolved to look at nature, but now we live in concrete jungles. This has incited humans to simulate what they desire in ever increasing amounts: stimulation. The accelerated rate of technological change in our contemporary culture has actually caused people to expect greater visual experiences. We seem to be playing technological “catch-up” with our emotional desires to witness nature. The richness and epic awe of nature doesn’t make itself known in urban environments and, though I have never experienced the “sublime” of a natural environment, this is what art brings to me. It might be the reason I am making art instead of a garden!

① *Beyond The Fall*, 2011 ▶▶





**Where analog photographs have tended to be viewed as custodians of a physically real time and space, digital images really have no index but, rather, present a mental or psychological reality. How do you view your imagery's relationship to the real?**

Well, comparing the moment of a photograph to the lack of constraints on a digital image really highlights the way in which I work, which is that I can draw out the making of a piece over the course of an entire year if I need to, rather than pay heed to the finite instant in which a snapshot is taken. It is through this working method that I can enhance or address differently the concept of time. I am trying to collapse a much greater span of time into one synthesized image than a photograph can ever succeed in doing. Obviously, long exposure photographs present something analogous in an interesting way, but I feel like my approach more naturally accommodates capturing the magnitude of duration when it comes to the archive of images at our disposal today.

**Would you say that your play with layering and depth is a challenge corporeally because humans are volumetric and your images are not?**

That is part of the reason that people are in the work — so that you can see those textures overlaid on a person. Encountering them together, you understand that the subject is experiencing tactility even though the image you are looking at only includes a simulated texture. Something I am moving forward with is trying to incorporate more digital textures, just to finally hint at that fact, rather than at the painterly or post-painterly textures that I've worked with thus far.

**Your colour palette has become more succulent and saturated recently. The colouration in *Untitled Gaze* (2011), for example, presents a skeletal visage highlighted with bright sanguine-hued components that gives the subject a grotesque, flayed-like appearance. Are your tonal choices meant to magnify the**

**'Frankensteinian' agglomeration of the subject as a metaphor for the way in which human personalities and daily experiences are cobbled together from re-appropriated matter today?**

Yes, I think the metaphorical reading you point out is the most immediate one gleaned from the figure. The combination of features is an anthropomorphic presentation of disparate pieces of information — a "digital flood", as it were.

It is harder to describe the motivations behind my moving interest in colour — my earlier palette was informed by the paint-like muddiness of mixing too many layers in Photoshop. I had to make a deliberate push to colour my work. *Untitled Gaze* started like many of my other pieces: it was executed by throwing pictorial elements together until a form emerged. When I started to recognize the grotesque, algorithmic nature of the figure, I became interested in the way acerbic colours enunciated this piece-meal appearance. I wouldn't say that this kind of unguided mixing is an inherent part of my process. A result that is unified while still maintaining its individual parts is something I have to aim for, otherwise the final work becomes muddled.

There is a threshold at which ambiguity in my work can take over and there was a time when I used to aim for that, most notably with *SouthWest Esteem* (2009) and *JeffWall Dug Me a Mountain* (2008). It was an over-abundance of imagery that I was after, but I moved away from that because I felt the product was too idealistic. Trying to attain that all-over grandeur feels dated, so I brought back the colour, the figure and symbolism to anchor the work.

**All three of these elements play prominent roles in *Blackfoot* (2011), which exudes a political tone that your other works do not. What are you hoping to communicate with this piece?**

I was trying to expose the concept of someone identifying themselves through items of accessory. The original image was William Notman's photograph





*Blackfoot Brave with Pony.* There was a tipi structure behind them, which I overlaid completely with other images that I felt were strongly associated with self-distinction. The flag image was from a Pride parade, for example. It is an instance of someone standing proudly for who they are. This piece is little bit less about individual identity, however, than it is about a phenomenon that I perceive today. My subject's face is covered, it's a symbol and gesture that means different things depending on circumstance. That it's represented in artwork draws out the similarities between an attempt to direct ones appearance and the act of representing oneself through art making. So in this case it could indicate that the subject doesn't relate their inborn features as being very significant to their conception of self, at least not compared to the ideas and things they surround themselves with. Being so malleable may be a bit dehumanizing but it's also a great source of empowerment.

**Earlier works such as *Artists Retreat* (2010) emphasize the themes of identity and human insularity. A recent piece, *Artists Image* (2012), bears an important resemblance thematically and conceptually, suggesting that the notion of solitude within the context of your artistic pursuits remains unresolved. Could the insularity you continue to explore also relate to the inevitably private experience of using social media and computational devices?**

Yes, definitely. First, I want to mention that for *Artists Image*, or any piece that refers to the "artist", the implication is a self portrait. It is also important to realise that the work is small — only 9 x 8 inches. I don't want a self-portrait to be that substantial a part of my work, so anything referencing authorship has to be on the smaller side. That said, I still want to address my hand in the work.

In terms of insularity, it is a tug of war for me between a private experience and the public persona that is being connected and informed by the reference material I manipulate. In the case of *Artists Image*, the background is a crop out from *Bow* in combination

with a digital image of Gerhard Richter's *Meadowland*. Journals and catalogues have served as mnemonic devices for years — this has become true of my work and is one of the functions that my daily image blog, [artofothers.com](http://artofothers.com), performs. I don't always remember the name of my favourite artists, but I can go back and check this archive if I need to. Where a journal is read in a private fashion, however, my art work and web blog are public and so my memory and artistic practice become inseparable from collective memory and public experience. I am becoming more comfortable working in this way because despite the private, solitary relationship I have with these images, as an artist I am also drawing from a well of material that I share with other people.

***Adobe Mask* (2012) most obviously confronts the viewer with the materiality of collage — the shreds of "paper" cascading down and across the figure's face do not look digitized but register as real physical debris. Do you see your work as an interruption of medium specificity and are you seeking a return to the agency of the artist as alchemist?**

Yes, I think that is spot on. I do feel like an alchemist, in a sense. I am aware of turning the different properties of digitalism on its head through the language of other media, but I always have to incorporate my particular viewpoint into the work. My engagement with mass media might exist in a collective sense, because the internet and images are available to many, but I have a personal lens that I can't ignore. I think it is honest of me to work that way. I am not idealistic, else my work would pretty much fit in with Modernism. The lofty ideals that were relied upon at that time don't make sense today. I'm not offering platitudes, as I don't believe they exist. Platitudes have edges, and people can fall off and over them today if they aren't careful.

***Beyond the Fall* (2012) exudes a mysticism due to the central figure's nostalgic, harlequin-patterned coat; the shorn, face-laden tree**

**trunks; and the suggestion of skull-like objects on the forest ground. Is this, according to your artistic instincts, what the world might resemble beyond the fall of man?**

When conceiving of this piece, I was thinking, in part, of "Mad Max". The piece suited a kind of post-apocalyptic world, with someone — a vestige of the past — walking around the landscape, collecting whatever resources they could find. I treated the title somewhat ambiguously, as the work was presented at O'Born Contemporary in the winter, after the fall, so it was sort of tongue in cheek. I don't mean to suggest that our world will ever look like the scape I have created. Rather, *Beyond the Fall* is sort of a nostalgic but fearful forecast. All that we have to inform our guesses of the future is the past, in a sense.

I also want to think of this piece as conceptualizing existence beyond the fall of humanity as a species. There is currently a discourse — TED Talks have supported the idea — surrounding the emergence of a Homo Evolutis class of humanity. We're in the process of taking a hold of our own evolution. I don't think we will ever completely eschew the societal norms and ways of life that humankind has subscribed to for so long. If we ever reach the stars or manage to manipulate deep space, there will still be people tending to farms in Oregon and choosing to live more traditionally. Certain primitive modes of being will transcend any changes we make, but the egos of people who can live for 200 years is also a very strange concept to consider and one that would greatly impact the overall profile of humans.

**The idea of a futuristic nostalgia is evident in your work; many of your images capture the world as a dystopia replete with virtual layers of the body and bereft of corporeal warmth. Is your outlook on our future interactions as a species pessimistic, or are you encouraging your audience to be more aware of the paths we are laying for ourselves?**

I think that whatever the future brings, we should be aware of how our actions and movements bring that future to fruition. It is the artist's role to ignite that kind of thought in their audience. That is why people who enjoy considering our place in history buy art or have art in their lives.

Whether I am pessimistic is an interesting question. Is it that I might be the last of a generation that has to experience and face death in the same way that Goya depicted that we have to face death? Some of his images are terrifying! Or, is it that I am pessimistic that if I could live forever, I might get lazy and the opportunity would not be as great as we anticipate? The scenario in which humans need to change their mode of living faster than a life-time has already happened, to be honest. There are people alive today that were born in the 19th Century, still able to give their personal account of a time and human experience that is vanishing behind us. The prospect of relative immortality with life extension or even just different recording methods means that we will think about history differently. What does the beginning of the information age look like in retrospect? How did we handle it? There may be people alive to remind us or in the least there will be artwork to elucidate an enjoy. ✨

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