

Toronto, Ontario

by Gil McElroy

In his work of the past two decades, Halifax, Nova Scotia-based artist Peter Dykhuis has chosen for his aesthetic focus some of the imaging technologies originally developed for military applications and which have since become part and parcel of the civilian realm. At the head of the pack are radar and space-based surveillance systems, both of which have found widespread use in weather forecasting. In his encaustic on panel paintings, Dykhuis appropriates the false color images produced, for example, by Doppler radar as it tracks, say, hurricanes moving up along the Atlantic seaboard. He pushes these artefacts to the very brink of abstraction in critiquing their rationale as accurate visual representations of reality. The architecture of his paintings – small square panels arranged together in rows and columns to comprise individual works – and the manner in which he applies encaustic – typically in small, lozenge-shaped areas of discrete color – simulates at a macroscopic level the digital nature of such images.

The most recent results of this ongoing enquiry made up the exhibition “datapaintings” (*Red Head Gallery, September 1–25, 2004*). Here, in a series of paintings in which the individual panels of a painting coalesce, pixel-like, into separate aesthetic entities, Dykhuis laid out a case for how the mediation of technology blurs our apprehension and understanding of natural and artefactual phenomena, effectively rendering them one and the same. Case in point: *datapainting.4 (before Juan/After Nortel)* (2004), in which he works with a satellite image of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, jutting out well into the North Atlantic, due south of which we see the first tentative strands of false colors denoting the presence of Hurricane Juan which would devastate the province in September of 2003. But all is not a straightforward as it seems; discontinuity holds sway, for where we would have expected to encounter the full image of the messy rotational swirl of the hurricane, what we instead find is the abrupt intrusion of the purely artefactual. Dykhuis changes the channel on us, substituting, in place of an expected image of nature’s indifferent wrath, the clean vertical columns of a stock market chart instead. It details the rise and eventual precipitous fall of the Canadian telecommunications giant Nortel which, equally indifferent to the suffering it caused as anything the natural world might generate, would wreak its own form of economic and social devastation.

In *datapainting.6* (2004), Dykhuis expands his use of such abrupt and discontinuous shifts in imagery within a single work, here by means of a tripartite integration of a single horizontal swath of panels painted with what resemble the dots and dashes of Morse Code (the original form of digital communication), a six-panel rectangle depicting the false colors of another satellite-seen North Atlantic storm – hot red toward the center and cooling down through orange, yellow, blue, and finally to black at the periphery – and a square of panels depicting an “X” shape rendered in perspective as a three-dimensional form.

The use of such perspective is new in Dykhuis’s work (he tends to favor the cartographic vantage point), but the implication that the world is comprised of underlying artefactual bits of meaningfully encoded information isn’t. The X-shape is also featured prominently in *datapainting.study1* (2004) a small work comprising alternating dark and light panels each of which is inscribed with either an “X” or an “O”. It’s the child’s game of tic-tac-toe, yes, but more importantly it is also the signifier of the very binary nature of the digital data that overwhelmingly inscribes the infosphere: plus/minus, on/off, either/or. In the paintings of Peter Dykhuis, X indeed marks a spot.