

Climbing “Internet Mountains”: A Conversation with Clive Holden

By Matthew Ryan Smith

Toronto-based artist Clive Holden engages the prospect of chance in various random compositions through his use of randomization algorithms. Combining new digital technologies with lo-fi analog formats, these sequences of possibility literalize Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of the *rhizome* (a philosophical concept relating to representation, among other things), which they describe as having “no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*.”¹ As such, Holden’s work presents a strong challenge to the very idea of the static, immobile image because the work dramatizes the simple drift of time. For this reason Holden’s images remain performative, quite literally making themselves anew every moment *ad infinitum*, a kind of controlled chaos. Recently, Holden has drawn his attention to random compositions created for media lightboxes, media walls, and projections, making them with web technology that’s been modded for offline purposes. But he has also been addressing the internet more generally by creating digital paintings, website artworks, and videos. In his latest series *INTERNET MOUNTAINS* (2014–present), he appropriates found imagery from the World Wide Web to produce fantastical digital landscapes and accompanying moving image works. Similar to his earlier work, these too depend on randomization processes to determine their visual trajectory, yet their approach is radically different. In both the digital paintings and internet videos, sunspots, orbs, and other abstract forms traverse the frame in a collision of analog and digital, real and surreal. I spoke with Holden via email exchange in May and July of 2015 about his recent projects and whatever else came to mind.

MATTHEW RYAN SMITH: I’d like to begin by tracing how you arrived at your recent series *INTERNET MOUNTAINS*. What concerned you then, and how did that translate into now?

CLIVE HOLDEN: *INTERNET MOUNTAINS* showed up as an idea last summer. It’s been a way to think about the relationship between real mountains—the kind one can climb—versus internet mountains that buzz with the power of the archetype they are, even if they’ve been dissolved into math and reconstituted into digital images. The project’s tagline is: “Mountains versus the internet, who will win?” I’ve been

thinking about this growing tension between objects and the ephemeral. It’s one of the most interesting border zones for making art; there’s lots of energy to work with there. Today, we’re seeing a battle between the older world of art forms with mass and texture—everything from sculpture to works on paper—versus fleeting or weightless forms on the other, including post-cinema, website artworks and net.art, conceptual data-based work, and even “social media art.” It’s all performance in a way: work that’s dynamic and continually producing unique moments.

A year into the project, I know it has enough fuel to keep me interested until it’s all made. Which is one of the ways I decide if I should make something. The project should be completed by 2017. We’ve always lived somewhere between mountains and idea. That relationship is basic to how we live, but now it’s being expanded. We live partly online, but we still need food, air, some exercise, and physical human contact to function.

MRS: Chance has driven your practice for several years. In 2013, I reviewed your show of *Media, Mediated* (March 2–30, 2013) at Stephen Bulger Gallery in Toronto for *Afterimage* [Ed. note: See the review in *Afterimage* 40, no. 6] and noted that “utilizing the randomization and dynamism found in nature serves to unsettle and reconfigure [your] installations, transforming them into ever-evolving media.” Was this an accurate description, and how is your new work engaging chance through algorithms?

CH: Nature is full of models for chance-based and dynamic structures. Ecosystems, for example—the way they continually adjust in response to events. Or a tree moving in the wind, where randomized movement is part of its strategy for balance and strength.

Both of my concurrent projects, *INTERNET MOUNTAINS* and *Media, Mediated* (2013–present) use nature, in the form of chance, as a making partner. My random compositions and website works use chance to complete themselves as we view them. I stand back and watch them too. These works give me ideas to use in object-based work like my digital paintings on paper. So I work in the middle of a conversation across big divides: between object and non-object; time-based and non-time-based or plastic; analog and digital; and 2-D versus 3-D.

MRS: Do you see randomized algorithms as chaotic or harmonious?

CH: It depends on whether they’re used to create one state or the other. Algorithms aren’t mysterious, they’re just lines of instructions. They tell a computer what to do. Code can be seen as a musical score for algorithms instead of musicians. And if the algorithms include randomization as part of their sets of instructions, then it’s like a score that includes rules for improvisation.

A simple algorithm might ask a computer to display an image *and* make it spin clockwise *and* do so every four seconds. When I add randomization to that algorithm, I’m just adding an “or” to the list of instructions—asking the computer to do this *or* that every four seconds. It means I’m letting go of some of my control, in the realization and flow of those composed, randomized moments. I’m letting the work complete itself, “live.”

It’s all within the structure of the composition, so it’s not chaotic in the usual sense of the word. I am employing chaos within a harmonious context, where serendipity is always at work through the awesome



INTERNET MOUNTAINS #19 from the series *INTERNET MOUNTAINS* (2014–present) by Clive Holden; courtesy the artist

power of new and surprising juxtapositions. They occur in both motif and (cinematic) montage structures created on the fly.

MRS: You've spoken of a philosophy that drives your work, that of "liveness." Could you speak of liveness as an aesthetic approach?

CH: The composed but live experience is a goal for me because it values variation. This is related to the value people give to the "humanness" they say is added to work by an artist's hands. Using digital tools means working within a twenty-first century high-precision context. Think about how accurate a simple digital watch is, or the clock in a computer, compared to the variation-rich world we used to live in. Without randomization all this digital code, or applied math, is less dynamic, less interesting, and also less stable. But random variation can be purposefully included in the mix to increase stability, the way tall buildings are designed to sway safely in response to earthquakes.

By also using lo-fi tools that feature a visual equivalent of "wow and flutter," I introduce variation, or liveness. I work with analog materials like Super 8 film, damaged vintage photographs, and even some older digital tech like GIFs, partly because they're less precise—they "wobble," which adds liveness to a work.

This was part of the power of real film projections in the twentieth century. Projected celluloid included minute variation as a core part of the experience because the apparatus was mechanical, even if the wiggle was experienced subliminally, or in other words, as pleasure.

Performance in art emphasizes this value—we know we're experiencing something that will never happen again in that precise way—which is often pleasurable. And I want to give my digital paintings this live quality too—the buzz that goes with their connecting with the instant before and after the moment that's shown spatially—the implication that they're located "in time."

MRS: *INTERNET MOUNTAINS* is composed of different elements: a digital painting series (2014–17), a video series (2014–16), a website artwork (2015), and a data-based random composition (2016). I think we should try to unpack this further. Why these mediums, in particular, and what does working within multiple mediums offer you?

CH: In each of my recent projects I'm beginning with one raw material as a starting point—often something that's overtly analog, like a beat-up old photograph or a small strip of discarded movie film. I take that material in different directions

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using digital tools to make a group of related works in opposing mediums. And each work helps me to finish the others.

Like the algorithms, they're all my collaborative partners, making suggestions, and even taking over at times. While watching a random composition I might see a moment in the time/motif-based flow that I'll use to start or improve a digital painting. This keeps me out of habit, by surprising me with fresh outlooks. It also redirects the temptation to be clever, which could produce boring work.

And in *INTERNET MOUNTAINS* I've taken this further by giving the digital paintings and videos supplementary roles as story boards and animatics. They're independent works, but they also mimic entertainment industry workflows. This is how game designers and film directors sometimes show programmers or special effects technicians what they want. In this project, the final work will be a large-scale random composition, which will be made in collaboration with the other works in the project. It's all building toward that work.

MRS: I find your digital painting *INTERNET MOUNTAINS #19* (2014) one of the strongest of the series, perhaps because it's one of the only, if not the only, works that contains the presence of a human. Can you talk about this anomalous figure and how you came to manipulate this image?

CH: The guy sitting on the cliff edge has become more significant over time, partly because he's the only visible human. For now, he's become my avatar in the project. And the glowing white balls seemed to have an aura-like glow that made me think of human thought. I've already mentioned digital ephemerality, or "the internet," but in fact the truly ephemeral art form is the idea. This tension between primary modes of living, between thought and terra firma, isn't new, but I think it's being made more visible at the moment. And perhaps the man in that image is experiencing this. He looks relaxed, like he's enjoying the great border he's sitting on.

MRS: Why, specifically, did you select the backdrop of mountainscapes for this series?

CH: Their status as an archetype—their dual role as the ultimate solid object and the timeless and weightless symbol for the same—is why I've used them to form the backdrop of these crude "skybox" structures.

In early twenty-first century artmaking, this duality is at the heart of an intense conversation between very basic categories of visual art. In the nineteenth century, the revolutionary invention called the photograph meant that something with the mass of a mountain could be mechanically captured on a piece of paper. But a photo print still has mass and texture. Analog photography could now be seen as a transitional medium between mass and massless forms of art. We've gone further, dissolving solid forms into zeroes and ones, so now we can even make a mountain dance. Like I've tried to do in *MOUNTAINS, REPETITION* (2013–present), another random composition series.

"Skybox" is a term that's borrowed from industrial game design, where mountains are often used as a background. But I'm also thinking about natural history museum dioramas, which come out of the nineteenth century. That's how most people would have visited the high mountains back then.

MRS: How do you situate *INTERNET MOUNTAINS* within the landscape painting tradition, and more specifically, the rich tradition of landscape painting in Canada?

CH: Most landscape works are trapped inside cliché, so people have difficulty seeing them clearly, if at all. They often pass them by, including on the internet where they molder in online archives and desktop wallpaper sites. Specifically, in Canadian landscape painting, Kent Monkman is an example of an artist who's done a lot to challenge this common point of view on landscape. He's brought a critical lens to this kind of subject matter by unpacking its political subtexts.

Some of the original landscape photographs I'm working with are also worth a closer look, especially those from the Rockies and Norway, taken in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Remixing romantic pleasures with a critical point of view is a mark of our time. I find myself thinking about people hiking to mountaintops carrying huge cameras. I know this kind of work requires waiting for many hours for the right light. So I think about how quiet it must have been. On the other hand, these images aren't innocent, even if some of the photographers' motivations were relatively pure. They've been used by colonial powers and nascent national governments to foster agendas; and they're used today to sell products by implying strength, stability, power—and as clickbait. I wonder if nineteenth-century landscape artists thought about their "dominion over nature," or if the work moved them past that filter?

MRS: Yes, I would assume that's part of it. It's a complicated question. I'd suggest these artists are engaged, in some way, with the sublime power of nature, the pursuit of beauty, romanticism (as you suggested), perhaps even topographical documentation; but the more sinister element is the undercurrent of "manifest destiny" that pushes the agenda of white supremacy and Judeo-Christian dogma on indigenous lands, tribes, and individuals.

CH: And the word "nature" is so complicated. Is data part of nature? Is raw data nature, before it's processed? Does pure math equal nature, but digital information not? We have the illusion of control these days via digital engineering, so we still think we're the bosses of mountains. But I'm sure people will look back at us from the twenty-second century and shake their heads.

MRS: The video work *INTERNET MOUNTAINS Video 3* (2015) is set against an opened book representing a mountainscape with a small cabin in the foreground. Rose-colored orbs, white sunspots, and blue arrows sometimes pulsate and at other times dart across the visual field. Can you talk about the relationship between these forms and the found imagery in your video works?

CH: That video shares a photo background with my digital painting *INTERNET MOUNTAINS #18* (2014)—a scan of an open book from an online archive. The strong vertical of the book's spine is important to both works, along with the reflected scanner shine. These show the nature of the book as an object, and the moment the new image was born during the scanner's process. Both echo and subvert the strong illusion of depth in the original photo.

This illusion is extended by the graphic illustration objects that float throughout the skybox's described 3-D space. The original photo

is from the Rockies in Montana and visiting there at the time would have been a rare experience. Adding the digital graphic objects helps to highlight the strange beauty of that original landscape.

MRS: These works have a surrealistic quality to them. They're both here and otherworldly. Do you see these as surrealistic or is it something else entirely?

CH: The protest and humor at the heart of Dada and surrealism still shows up in the dichotomy between the commodification of conservative art processes, and the always shifting forms that are striving to maintain artistic independence. A dichotomy at work in *INTERNET MOUNTAINS* also lies between the conservative nature of landscape art and the challenging sight of digital, geometric forms engaging in mock battle.

I'm glad you've used the term "otherworldly," because while making *INTERNET MOUNTAINS Video 3* I found myself adding multiple suns to the sky one day, and that term popped up. I did know that multiple suns was a science fiction trope. But I read recently that it's been proven to be nonfictional—in fact, it might be more common than our single-sun solar system.

MRS: Your earlier works contain text. One encounters film leaders and specific words such as "exposed." Your new work moves away from text and instead embraces a more graphic approach. Could you talk about the relationship between text and graphic design, and whether this was a concern for you approaching the new work?

CH: Text has a role in some of my website artworks such as *dirtyfilm.org* (2006)—and also in my *EXPOSED* series (2002–present), in which I've made several works from the last five frames in a cartridge of Kodachrome Super 8 film (the word "EXPOSED" showed up in a little window at the bottom of the cartridge, when it was time to take it to the lab). When I watch it now I continue to *read* that text as it moves, revolves, etc. Until it turns fully upside down. Then it becomes primarily graphical and I stop reading it, which is part of what the work's about, that switching back and forth.

Two other recent works where I've included text are *Wind at Lake Manitoba* and *UNAMERICAN UNEAMOUS* (both 2013), which are both large-scale random compositions. Part of what's interesting about text is the way it commands one's attention (it takes an effort not to read onscreen movie subtitles, for example).

I used this effect in those two works, where the text appears regularly in black boxes, to re-assert the non-montage, non-time-based nature of that moment in the work. This subverts the habitual travel into duration that happens while we watch any moving visuals on a screen. My aim is to highlight the border between time-based and non-time-based work by moving back and forth over that line, between cinematic montage and pictorial motif. It's partly this act of reading, the small mental activity required, that causes this regularly timed *snap* back into the non-time-based point of view.

At the same time, the text is connecting to capital-C Cinema through its reference to movie titles. And with *dirtyfilm.org*—it was my first random composition—it connects to the world of concrete poetry. It's still viewable online.



INTERNET MOUNTAINS #11 from the series *INTERNET MOUNTAINS* (2014–present) by Clive Holden; courtesy the artist

MRS: I'd like to talk about color. You probably don't consider yourself a colorist, but I would argue otherwise. Your body of work demonstrates a commitment to visual devices such as contrast, overexposure, and bleaching; then there's also this delicate rose hue, like a signature. Can you talk about the role of color in your work?

CH: Color is important to me. It sounds like an obvious statement coming from an artist, but this isn't always the case. I think of color as one of my favorite tool groups, along with structure, time, and chance. I do tend to like rose hues, crimsons, pinks, and certain shades of blood. They've become more prominent in recent years, and perhaps this comes from the influence of internet culture. But I don't know if I use enough soft yellow to truly be working in that space (I still like *filmic*, chemistry-based, pre-digital colors too).

My use of these "electric reds" accelerated after I saw Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950–51), which I did first see on the internet. I'm actually thinking about painting more than anything while making recent work.

MRS: You've mentioned that these internet video works are "post-cinematic." Could you explain this idea further?

CH: For me, the term reaches back across twentieth-century theatrical cinema to the nineteenth-century proto-cinema era, when incredible inventiveness was brought to combining images and movement. Now we're seeing this rate of invention again. The conventional ways of watching a movie are dying. If theatrical cinema is still alive in twenty years, it will be very different. I think it will incorporate liveness in a variety of new ways.

MRS: Critics describe much of the work of Petra Cortright, Cory Arcangel, and Lorna Mills as "net.art." What is net.art? Nobody calls painting



INTERNET MOUNTAINS #28 from the series *INTERNET MOUNTAINS* (2014–present) by Clive Holden; courtesy the artist

"painting art." To me, it's just another available medium for artmaking. Is *INTERNET MOUNTAINS* net.art?

CH: *INTERNET MOUNTAINS* isn't net.art, but it is the internet. And the project will include a website artwork. I often use modded web tech to make my offline works, and I think there's a class of art now that seems to have been filtered, or directly influenced, by the internet. You can see obvious connections between these works, like their "internet colors." Maybe everything now is the internet. With *INTERNET MOUNTAINS*, most of the found mountains come from the internet. But I'm using the word "internet" in a loose way to mean all post-analog tech. And this seems close to how the word "analog" itself has come to include non-electronic items, including books.

MRS: Is it possible to see digitally? As an artist working in the digital medium, do you think the digital has changed the way we perceive the world, images, and other people?

CH: Yes, I do. We're immersed in the accumulated tech of our time like fish swimming in the ocean. Whatever tools we're using in a given era are inseparable from the human story. And artists are creative tool users. We look at each new tool, hold it the wrong way, or break it, trying to see how it can be used or combined with other tools. Right now, that process occurs mostly in a digital context: the internet and whatever comes next.

MRS: As someone working within the parameters—one might even say the medium—of the internet, how do you think the internet is changing contemporary art discourse?

CH: I read artists' and critics' blogs, and follow them in social media, which makes for an interactive and international conversation. Most of these writers aren't paid directly for their activity, which

may make them more independent in a sense. I don't know if the conversation is better or worse than it used to be, but it is different.

I see a lot more strong work than I used to, which is great, but I see less of it in person, and that's a problem. It's tempting to think of seeing something on the internet or in a book as the same thing. But it's not usually what the artist intended.

Art and related ideas bounce around the internet now, quickly and semi-randomly. I have friends and colleagues I've never met in person, and they influence me every day. Of course, part of all this conversation happens now between us and algorithms (and the owners of those algorithms—internet searches are increasingly a pseudo-random process). Random shuffle hasn't been truly random for a while now. There's less serendipity and more sneaky funneling of our attention toward product. We have to be wily, trying our best to sidestep the downside of these constant changes, but that's nothing new.

There *is* the new question of which is more important: internet success, or traditional success in so-called real life. Most internet-influenced artists still need their online lives to have a robust, offline counterpart, in order to pay the rent and eat.

MRS: Writers and critics, too. Speaking of writers, who are you reading right now?

CH: My brilliant wife's [Canadian novelist Alissa York] latest novel (out in spring 2016) is set in the Amazon. So I'm thinking about tropical jungle ecosystems, and how they're different from northern dynamic structures in nature. I'm also usually dipping in and out of short story collections, and there are always various art books in the mix. I recently enjoyed *Color in Art* (2006) by John Gage.

MRS: Do you have any projects or exhibitions planned for the near future?

CH: In 2016, I'll have exhibitions at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto, part of the Scotiabank CONTACT Festival, and at Stephen Bulger Gallery. My concurrent projects, *INTERNET MOUNTAINS* and *Media, Mediated*, will keep me busy through 2017. After that, I have a major new random composition planned.

MRS: Finally, the last question from the "Proust Questionnaire": What is your favorite motto?

CH: "Make it new but make it now."

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NOTE 1. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 25.


Video content
for this article is
available online!

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