

Jacob Hashimoto

Jacob Hashimoto Relates How Layered Narratives and the Legacy of Landscape Abstraction Inform New Ways of Thinking About Space

by Kate Mothes | 23 August 2022

In the suspended worlds of upstate New York-based artist Jacob Hashimoto, a multitude of undulating forms and layers begin with a single element: a kite. Each screen-printed disc is inspired by his surroundings, pop culture, and current events, and the individual components are assembled into fields in a vast range of vivid colors, patterns, and sizes, from wall works to elaborate architectural installations. His interest in the legacy of the gestural landscape abstraction associated with painters like Mark Rothko or Helen Frankenthaler translated the brushstroke into a repeating module or disc shape. Hashimoto describes the kite elements as



"The Eclipse" (2017-2018), acrylic, bamboo, screen prints, paper, wood, and cotton. St. Cornelius Chapel, Governors Island, New York. Photo by Erin O'Hara. All images © Jacob Hashimoto, shared with permission

“pixels,” nodding to his interest in virtual realms and world-building. Game design and 3D-modeling software have inspired an evolving interest in layers, multiplication, and movement around physical space.

Colossal editor Kate Mothes spoke with Hashimoto in June of this year via Zoom. They discuss the significance of personal narrative, the evolution of technology and its influence on the ways that we perceive our surroundings, and the importance of teaching yourself new skills.

This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Kate: I'm curious about your upbringing in a smaller community, then working for a while in different cities, and recently, relocating again to a smaller community in the Hudson Valley. Has that affected how you approach your work?

Jacob: I think it was easier for me to move to a smaller town where there's not a lot going on than a lot of artists from more metropolitan areas, especially because of the way that a lot of artists that come from urban areas are drawing on that energy and cultural information for their work. Having grown up in Walla Walla, Washington, which at the time was 25,000 people, three hours from any place, I think that my reliance on outside entertainment is much less. I have the ability to move here and not lose my mind. I guess in the end,



“The Fascinogenic Eye” (2022), acrylic, bamboo, paper, wood, and Dacron.
Photo by Derek Zeitel

I was in the city from the time I went to school in Chicago, and then I moved to Los Angeles, and then I moved to New York, so, most of my adult life. That energy and that need to survive in those kinds of hostile environments was useful and good for my work—probably, but at some point I got a little bit worn out. Ossining, where we are now, turned out to be kind of a good solution. From here, we’re 50 minutes from our station to Grand Central, so we can do a lot in the city, but we don’t have to have the day-to-day living there, which I think is good for me.

Kate: Speaking of geography and landscape, how do you approach the relationship between landscape and virtual environments?

Jacob: When we think about the tradition of landscape and the service of landscape representation over the history of art, let’s say... the way that we’re creating landscapes digitally, we are doing essentially what those earlier explorations were doing. It just happens that oil paint was very contemporary at the time, the cutting edge media. And printing was cutting edge, so hand-drawn images is what you had. When we’re talking about art historically, if you’re to look at what the most important landscape works being made today were, it might be something like Elden Ring. It might be something that is coming out of the digital environment or learning how to bridge the gap between television and gaming.

Film and gaming in these built virtual environments are becoming really important. They also have this ability

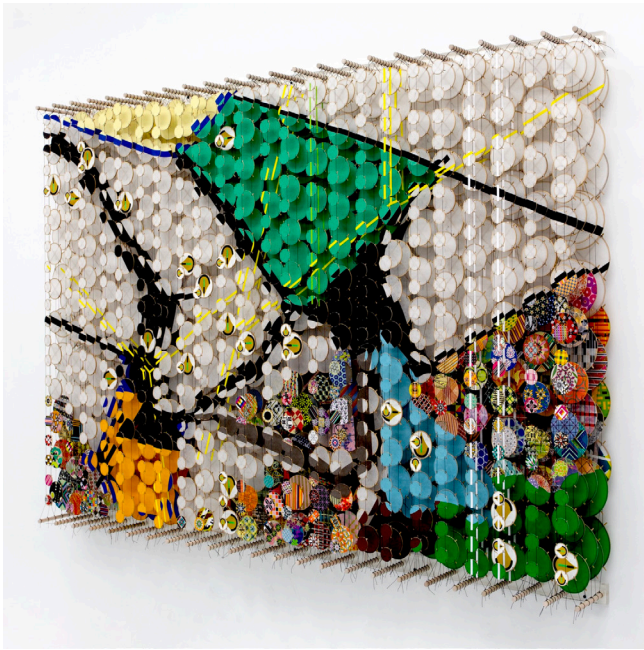
to tell us a lot about our culture. The way that you can embed utopian hopes and dreams and aspirations and fears and all of that stuff into these built environments digitally, that people interact with, I think it’s super important. And as somebody who comes out of this language of post-war American painting and abstraction, and the intersection of those two vocabularies, ignoring digital landscape work is folly, because I think it’s where a lot of really important action is.

If you can take this historical language that I work a lot with, and you can build bridges or connect the tissue between that and what I see as really important digital work going on in terms of world-building and representation and cultural building, I think that’s a way of illustrating the chain of history in a certain sense. It’s easy to be like, oh, our world’s so different than it’s ever been, and that these Whistler paintings aren’t important anymore or whatever. But if you can draw lines between those and what’s happening in contemporary media, I think that it makes everybody understand that the language you’re seeing on the computer isn’t a new language. It’s built on a structure that we as human beings collectively created over millennia. Understanding that actually helps to inform how we read those spaces and how complicated they could be. It’s also a way of bringing together generations and societies. In some ways, I think that there is a great opportunity for it to be a teacher and talk about how things can connect in ways that might seem disparate or foreign or scary, intergenerationally.

Kate: Do the colors and patterns often relate to the specific site that a work is commissioned for? Or are



“The Eclipse” (2017-2017), acrylic, bamboo, screen prints, paper, wood, and cotton, at St. Cornelius Chapel. Photo by Timothy Schenck, courtesy of Governors Island



“The Fascinogenic Eye” (2022), acrylic, bamboo, paper, wood, and Dacron.
Photo by Derek Zeitel

you generally pulling from sources in that moment and combining in a unique way?

Jacob: In the Studio la Città show, there’s a bunch of stuff going on concurrently. Some of them are about these patterns that we’ve been building over time, about viruses and things like that and plagues. They’re all kind of embedded in there. We took a whole bunch of images from viruses and plagues and also plants growing in our neighborhoods. My staff was taking pictures of things during the pandemic and over the last two years, and we built a bunch of these graphics out of them. They’re kind of like the diary of our day-to-day life compounded with what was going on globally over the last couple of years.

And then the cloud images—things that I’ve actually done the drawings for in the 90s—is combined with what is a collage of collages that gives you this tapestry, a fractured image of the world at this moment for me.

Kate: Do you view each piece as sort of an autonomous being or entity? Are they related to each other in any way, in terms of their layers or the sense of world-building or universe-building?

Jacob: Probably it’s like a Venn diagram of some kind, where sections of them overlap other sections to cre-

ate a fuller picture of what’s going on. When I do a show with Studio la Città, I tend to go deeper into my catalog because I want to showcase some of where we came from and where we are now. You can see this arc of progress, as part of the Venn diagram, but in terms of world-building and kind of a singular world vision, it’s like a fractured world vision, made up of all these kinds of moments.

You mentioned the big installations and the layering, and I’ve been thinking about layering for a while because this work started in the early 90s. We had Photoshop in art school, but I didn’t use it. The way that Photoshop and Illustrator and all those Adobe products and things work with layers—they weren’t really part of the day-to-day vocabulary that we were dealing with. We were dealing with XYZ, coordinate systems, because that’s how objects are made. At the time that I started doing this work, I was dealing with room-size, three-dimensional grids, and over time, the works collapsed into kind of a 2D format, so in a way I was obliged to create a finite number of layers.

There are six offset layers in each artwork. I didn’t think about it for a long time, but the timing of my innovation with that format really paralleled the explosion of these sorts of graphic computer programs that were teaching us to build images in really specific, layered ways. Over the years, I’ve actually started looking at that in retrospect. I’m not sure I was completely aware of it, but the language of the layers is really written into these pieces in a way that’s kind of curious. It’s like if you could turn Photoshop sideways, and you could see into all the metadata of it before you collapsed the image. All the decisions that you make about the artwork or modifying the artwork are

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Detail of "The Fascinogenic Eye" (2022). Photo by Derek Zeitel

all still visible in what we're doing. But when you stand in front of it, it visually collapses, as if you consolidated the whole image.

Kate: Have you ever worked digitally?

Jacob: Early on, around 2002, right at the time when 3D-modeling software was small enough that you could actually run it on a normal PC. There's this thing in Asian painting, this idea that you can paint the earth, the sea, and the sky in the same gesture. The master can do this. It's this kind of meditation on the idea of sameness. I was making these pieces that were like the sea and the sky, made from the same mark. I was making these ellipses and creating waves, kind of scooping out like a melon baller to make these cuts into a solid form. And I was taking that and molding a cloud form off of that. I determined the best way to build them was through 3D modeling.

We made a bunch of those in Europe in the early aughts, and then I kind of stopped. Some of that was because I was working primarily in Italy where we were using these guys who did prototyping for the automotive industry in Modena. Bugatti, Maserati, all of them are right there, so you have this boutique company that already does this stuff but on a very small scale.

I remember one day we were in there cutting this 12 x 12 foot giant wave sculpture, and they were like, "Okay, you guys have to leave. Schumacher is coming with the engineer, and they're going to cut the spoilers or the ground controls for the Formula One car." Nobody could be in the building because it was

top secret, so we had to leave while Schumacher, the engineer, and the machine operator cut the back for the race car. It was really interesting to see that happen, but that's how small that industry was. We were also using the Ferrari painter to paint because, you know, it's Italy, and that's how you do things, all in one workshop. Somebody's always got a cousin that knows somebody, like, "Yeah, he'll sneak you in on Saturday!"

Kate: When did you start working with the bamboo kite shapes?

Jacob: I started using those probably around 1994. I was at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and I was in my last year. I'd come back to school—that's one thing that I think was important: I dropped out of Carleton College in Minnesota, and I knocked around for a year or so and then decided to go back to art school. I was very serious when I got back, and I thought, I'm going to make this count. By the time I was getting into my last semester, I felt a lot of pressure to perform at a really high level coming out of that program. I felt like I had a lot invested; I'd given up a lot to get there, but it got to a point where I just couldn't make any work anymore. It was basically some kind of creative block that I hadn't encountered before. I hit this wall where I was like, I can't make anything at all.

I was talking to my dad on the phone, explaining this crisis I was going through. He's a writing professor, so he taught, and he described these weird tests, almost sadistic tests that they would give their graduate students, where they would make them do all these different kinds of journal writing exercises. One of these was stream-of-consciousness writing but not like stream-of-consciousness for the next five minutes; it's stream-of-consciousness for, like, two hours. So they're like, "Write as much as you can in two hours. And when you're done, if you come to the end of your idea and you have nothing else to say, just write the same word over and over and over again." The idea is that when your mind kicks in again, your body is ready to receive it.

And he said the volume of work that they actually got was so much greater than any other technique that they had applied. His takeaway from it was that you need to do something in the studio that's about the practice of doing, not about achievements. He was

like, “You need to figure out a way to go to the studio every day. Figure out something to do in there. I don’t think it even matters what you do. You could build model airplanes or kites or something.”

When he mentioned building kites, I thought, that’s a great idea. When I was a kid, he used to build kites in our attic in Pocatello, Idaho. He was writing his dissertation, and he built these little teeny kites that he’d fly out his office window on, like, a spool of thread. His father had taught him to build kites, and they used to take chopsticks and cut them up and make little kites out of them, which drove my grandmother crazy because it was right after World War II. They were Japanese-Americans living in Denver. They’re poor and they’re taking the chopstick, which is the implement with which you feed yourself, and just cutting it up and trying to make it into a toy, which seems just like an illustration of bad behavior at the highest level! I had these stories that I remember about the kite, but no experience building them.

Kate: So you just needed to be doing something!

Jacob: Yeah, I sat down and I started making these 18-inch-high kites, teaching myself step by step. This was pre-internet, before YouTube tutorials, so I had a bunch of books. I would build one and go to Grant Park across the street and fly it, and then it would crash in a certain kind of way, and you have to think, why did it crash? So I’d go back to the studio, build another one. I ended up building 45 or 50 of these things, and they were all thumbtacked over the big wall that I was supposed to be using to make paintings. I was in the painting program, so I felt an obligation to make paintings. Amy Sillman was one of my professors at the time, and I talked to her about it, and she was like, “You don’t need to make anything you don’t want to make! This stuff is so much better than your paintings.” At the time, I was huddling in the corner and, like, shaking, very concerned about how I was going to finish that program.

At some point, I went into the studio to clear off the wall and make the paintings for real. I hooked a paper clip onto each one of these kites, put a wire across the studio, and I hung them from this wire. There was this big row of them hanging from the ceiling like Chinese lanterns or something. I started making the paintings, and I remember sitting on my bench, drinking my tea

one day and looking at my terrible paintings. I looked up at the string of kites, and I was like, yeah, I could totally do something with those! It was kind of what I was trying to do with the painting but couldn’t do.

The paintings I was trying to do at the time were really loose, landscape-based abstractions. They had flavors of Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler and the heroes of that kind of lightweight gestural abstraction. And the question was, if you’re interested in that stuff and you want to talk about that language, how can you talk about that in a way that also reflects your own experience?

The idea of building these field painting abstractions out of this element, this pixel, is actually kind of etched with the story of your childhood. And this story of authorship, right? Through the practice of building all those kites and teaching myself how to build them on my own, there was a kind of reclamation of my own

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responsibility for authorship. So, at the core of all the work to this day is that pixel. It’s this achievement for me; all the work is built from it.

The base of it is still, for me, about personal narrative. The cool thing about kites is that they’re these pan-cultural objects, right? It’s one thing when you’re young and making this stuff, trying to fly a kite in the park, but when you start showing these pieces around the world, you start seeing other cultures’ relationship with the kite. This is something that all of humanity owns, too. It’s not my object, but I have my own stories about it that makes this important to me, so I think it’s particularly well-suited to the kind of work that I make because the work that I make is also everybody’s property in a certain sense. The kite is everybody’s property. I don’t believe in being didactic. I bring my own story to the kite. We all bring our own stories to abstraction, and we see ourselves reflected



"Skyfarm Fortress" (2014), acrylic, bamboo, paper, wood, and cotton, at Mary Boone Gallery, New York, NY. Photo by Cesar Arredondo

in that, when the artist has set up a situation that's generous enough that you can see yourself in it.

Kate: Do you feel that there's a challenge or something particularly interesting in the way that the work is experienced so differently in a physical space versus the experience of navigating a virtual space like a website?

Jacob: There are two ways I've been thinking about it. One is, like, I know there's a difference, and I'm not doing anything to kind of compensate for it, and maybe I should be doing more to speak to that digital language. It's like the whole post-Internet art notion where people are making art for Instagram. I feel kind of fortunate to be of the generation that hasn't had to do that, especially as an emerging artist.

There's a piece called "The Eclipse" that we showed at Governor's Island. Some of the photographs are really beautiful. It's a church that is filled with this piece, and the church itself is beautiful, and it's kind of inspiring. When you just add this giant sculpture, it's weaving in and out of columns and this old, falling-down church, and there is a sense of awe that you don't get from an image. When you walk in and you're the only person in the room with this thing, there's this sense of the sublime; they move, and they shift with the wind from your body. That is difficult to get from a picture unless the picture is the artwork.

There's going to be a lot of change in the next little bit. Our acclimation to digital interaction is going to completely change the way that we think about exhibition spaces and sharing experiences because so much shared experience we're doing now is much more virtual. It's going to inform where we see our town square being, where we see our meeting places and how we interact with them. Maybe I'll surprise myself, but I still think about the early aspirations of my work, where I was thinking, "I want this piece to feel like you're sitting on a beach right before a storm hits."

Kate: Very rooted in a physical kind of local experience?

Jacob: Yeah. I think that's what I want to capture with the big sculptures. They really feel like sitting on the edge of a canyon, or they have that kind of physical, bodily presence. I think that there's going to be a generation of artists who really see what's happening in the environment, who are going to be moving further away from those experiences as places of solace.

Also, our relationship with the natural environment is completely changing with global warming. The world is hostile now in a way that it wasn't when I was a kid. I mean, it was always hostile, but you could sit on a beach and not feel like a tsunami was going to wipe you off the face of the earth. And now we're like, "Well, we're getting a lot of rain here in New York. Are we going to start getting hurricanes up here next?" There's a sense of, what's coming in the next couple of years? And it doesn't feel like it's going to be good. It's really changing the meaning of lots of things.