

LIVING IN DIGITAL

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As a working digital artist, Sr. Theresa Couture, p.m. combines new technology with traditional methods and themes



Photo by Jodie Andruskevich

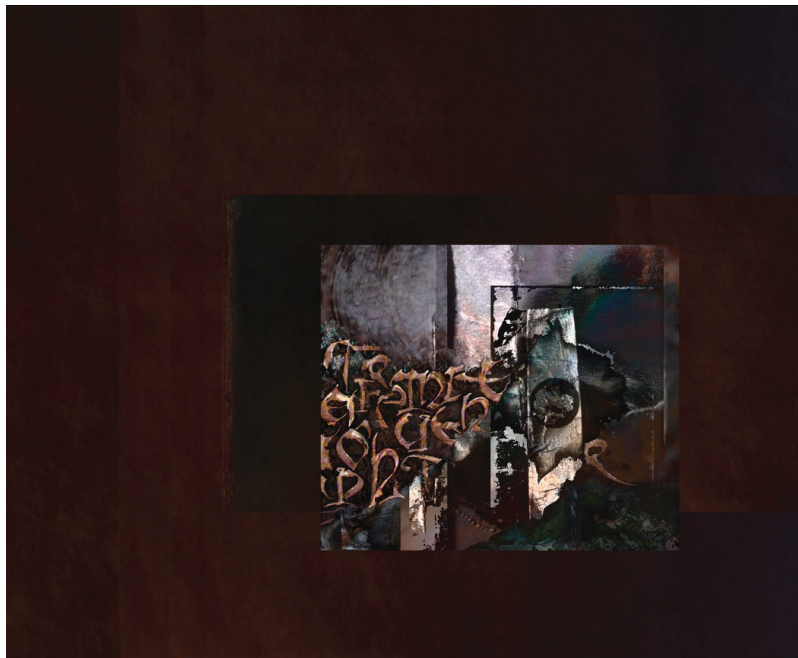
Innovative. Graceful. Intelligent. Sr. Theresa Couture's artwork is captivating. Her images are deep and rich, simultaneously soothing and stimulating. She blends traditional techniques and digital technology to create art that combines her love of design, letterforms, and surface textures with her literary background and influences from the vast history of art. "Between the Word and the Entry" (*pictured on the next page*) is a perfect example—the arrangement of letterforms against a richly textured background transforms the familiar into something mystical.

Couture's work in digital and integrated media has been included in exhibitions at the Museum of Biblical Art in New York, N.Y. and the Armand Hammer Museum at UCLA. Ironically, she resisted using digital media initially. She had earned an MFA in design at Rhode Island School of Design, in

addition to her bachelor's and master's degrees in English from Rivier, and was working on her doctorate in theology in the arts. "I was able to move back and forth between the applied art and studio art mindsets easily in my own head," she says. She had an intuition that she could make art with the computer, but hadn't used computers much. She participated in an intensive summer workshop to explore emerging digital technology and began experimenting with modular drawings.

In the 1992–93 academic year, Couture was invited to a full-year residency at the Kodak Center for Creative Imaging on the coast of Maine. People pioneering digital art gathered to experiment, share new developments, and teach short-term courses. Couture could take any class that appealed to her as long as she was willing to work in an open studio. She soon became accustomed to having people watch over her shoulder. It took longer to find her own approach to digital art-making.

Drawing with a stylus and having the image she created appear on a monitor felt odd to Couture at first. Her initial work resembled traditional media too closely for her liking. She examined what other artists were doing. Work that deliberately showed pixel structure didn't fit Couture's aesthetic preferences. But collages that were smoother than they would have been using traditional methods suggested creative possibilities to her. She asked herself, "What is it that this medium does and what can it mean for my work?"



Detail of "Between the Word and the Entry," from Couture's series "Reflections on a Poet God"

Digital art was a chance for Couture to make oil and water mix. "It eliminates the material resistances present in traditional media," she says. This realization gave her an opportunity to focus, leading to a dramatic morning when she bridged the disconnect between drawing with a stylus and producing an image on screen. She had begun to embrace the new medium.

While Couture wanted to find the strengths inherent in digital art, she didn't want the medium to be a visual emphasis in her work. An image within an image is often present in her work, something that can be done smoothly in digital medium, but it is the idea of the embedded image, not the technology producing it that is most important to her. She still enjoys drawing and painting by hand and working

with different papers, some of which she makes. “I don’t particularly like monitors, I prefer to go to print,” Couture says. “I see printing as the final stage in the artistic process.”

Couture sees herself as an artist and an art educator equally. While she enjoys working on her own, she also values interaction with others. “I bury myself in my studio, often in front of my computer,” she says. “I’m alone when I create my art.” Teaching is the perfect complement to her solo work, allowing Couture to engage in a dialog about art with students.

Communication systems fascinate Couture, especially alphabets. Letterforms appear frequently in her art. She describes numbering and writing systems as a form of code. “It’s all abstract, arbitrary. Each is magnificent for what it accomplishes,” she says. She points out that despite the differences among spoken, written, and visual language, they’re interconnected in the larger pattern of communications.

The opportunity to work with young artists excites Couture. She enjoys working closely with her students and watching them evolve. When Couture returned to Rivier after her artist-in-residency, she made progress in expanding digital imaging facilities for students, offering them more sophistication. She says that her residency helped her take a direction she didn’t know she would take. It turned out to be good for Rivier’s art department as well as for herself.

As an educator, she advocates balancing digital and traditional tools. “The eye learns to see in a very special way with traditional tools,” she says. At the same time, she encourages students to find the methods that work best for them. “My emphasis with students is helping them find the artists that they are,” she says.

To keep students from trying to emulate her aesthetic, Couture shares her own work with reserve, sometimes mixing it in with other examples she’s chosen to show students. “I do want them to know that I’m working,” she says. “I also want them to understand that for some, design will be enriched by studio art and vice versa; for others, design or painting or some other singular involvement will be so fulfilling they won’t be inclined to do anything else.” Couture’s own work demonstrates that different fields and mediums complement each other. She has found synergy in traditional materials and digital imagery, design and fine art, and working as both artist and teacher. ■

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