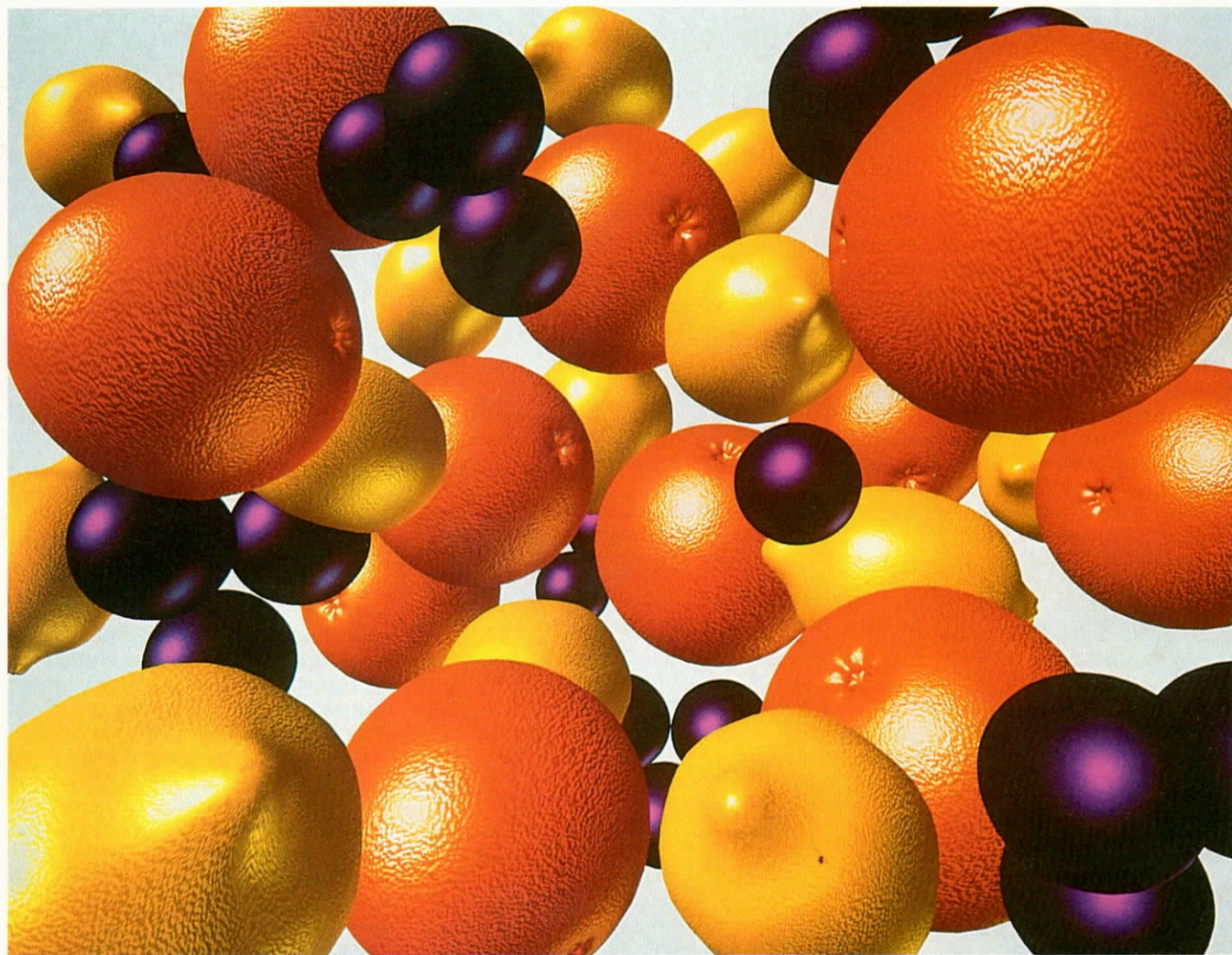# What Is 'The Computergraphics Look?'

"The computergraphics look?" Shelley Lake's visions suggest the possibilities. Her works range from photorealistic to painterly to surreal, at a time she describes as still "the horse and buggy days of computergraphics."

I was reunited with my cousin, who had a crush on me 20 years ago. Her eyes were still adoring, reminding me of the rewards of being older and immeasurably wonderful. Her husband sat opposite, amused, as she exhorted me to distill all my adventures. "What *are* you doing with photography?" she gushed.

"Wonderful things," I began, as she settled in her chair and John puffed his pipe. "It's a new world. Computergraphics...."

Is it machinelike or humanistic? Chrome or plastic? Futuristic or historical? Cartoonlike or painterly? The answer, in stills and movies, is: Yes.

She frowned. John's pipe gurgled. I stopped. The adoration was missing from her eyes.

"Yes?" I coaxed. She was a hausfrau now, but by cracky, she was still my kid cousin. The one who'd studied art at New York University, as I labored—wonderfully, I'm sure—over my camera in my very hip loft in the then-blooming TriBeCa.

"I've had it with all this computer everything," she wailed. "All this impersonality. It will never replace the

humanism in art. Art is for people, not machines. Why, van Gogh...."

I remember three things from that reunion: the history of Impressionism, the gurgle of John's pipe and my vow never to prejudge people's concepts of computer art.

This is a new column and you are the reader. Possibly, we fit together like hand in glove. Just as possibly, we fit like foot in mouth. As a columnist, I stand on a razor's edge with an abyss on either side: To one, digital imaging, about which a little is known and more unconsidered. To the other, you, bearing some of the knowns and unknowns, and no further description.

Chances are that you know more about computergraphics than I do. But until you say so, I have to guess you know less. I have to guess you're like my cousin with one exception: You didn't think I was wonderful 20 years ago. You have less patience.

What is 'The Look?'

So let's start with: What is the computergraphics look? It's a simple question, with a complex and enormous answer.

Some people, like my cousin, think computergraphics equates with machine-age futurism trendy in the 1960s, when magazines ran wonders-of-tomorrow features about robots that would vacuum the rug and cook the supper, and paint pictures too because they were so talented. As graphical reinforcement, these were accompanied with random splotches of color or geometric studies—Art-Deco cubed—over captions like "The Mechanical Rembrandt."

I don't know about cleaning the carpet, but these descriptions came nowhere near accuracy on computer artistry. For all their forced expectations, the real wonder is greater. The wonder of computer art is that it does not look mechanical, that it is human like van Gogh if we want.

But those popular articles were catchy, so I must make certain you have not the same expectations as my adoring cousin.

What is the computergraphics look?

I got a reply from a representative of the Quantel company at the NAB Show last year. His face twisted-up, and he spat his words just like my cousin. He said: "The computergraphics look, so-called, is a crutch used by inferior graphics systems that are incapable of the transparency of ours."

I winced at his scorn, much as at my cousin's. But it symbolizes the answer to my query: The computer-
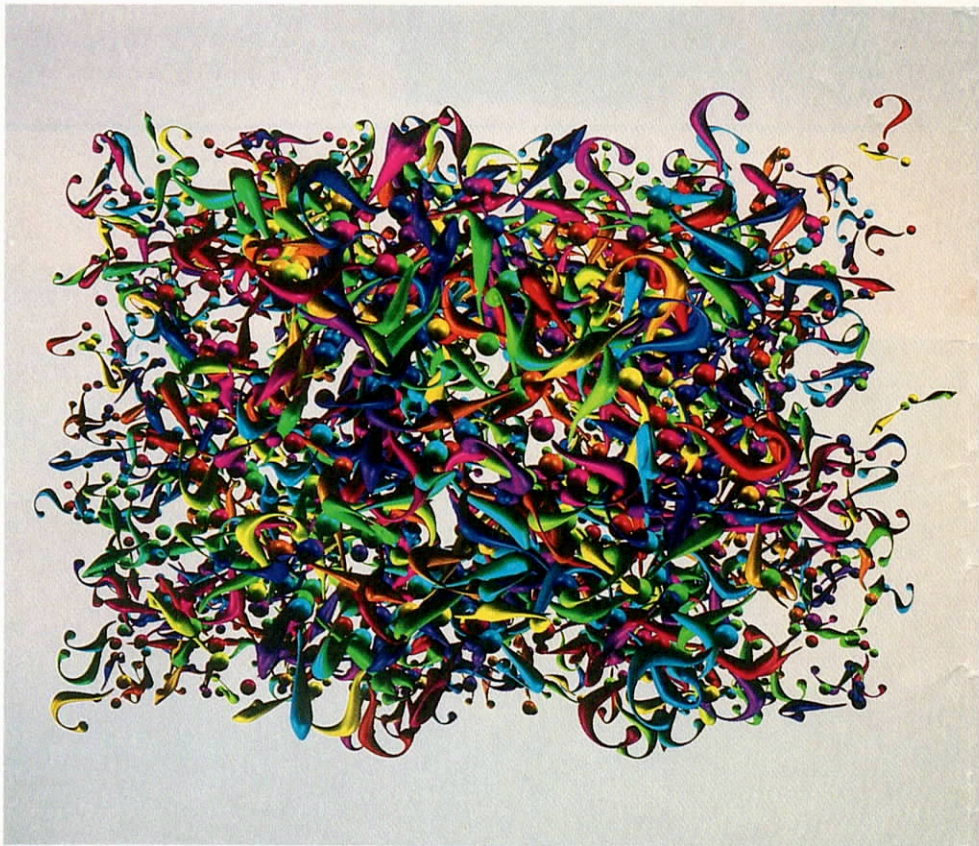
©Shelley Lake

graphics look is no single style, but whatever we make it. Absolutely whatever.

What It's Not

It is not chrome. It is not plastic. Nor is it flying logos. Not mirror nor marble nor glass. It is all, and they're for starters. These are the icons, the cliches already born. They're the computergraphics look of people so lazy or nervous they must boast, "Me computer."

The computergraphics look is photographic. It is van Gogh. It is Pac Man. For starters.

What can you show on a TV screen? That helps define the range of the computergraphics look. Anything responsive to the TV look is an inclusion among computergraphics.

A TV picture is composed of pixels, and a film picture is composed of halide grains. The computergraphics look is whatever can be captured by pixels and grains. Image bits.

Attempting to clarify such issues is a long-standing goal, but maybe the computer can shed additional light, adding wrinkles of its own. For example, each Daguerreotype is an original, as is each computergraphic. But also, no computergraphic is an original. Each is made fresh, from code that is graphically intangible. Daguerreotypes originate with solid

objects—an "original scene"—but computergraphics originate in the dark. So don't computers redefine our concept of "an original?"

These sorts of issues make me question the gentleman from Quantel. The computer may be stylistically transparent, adopting any look. But artists are assertive. Proud as they are of their work, they are sometimes equally of their tools. They may create a style that is insistently, uniquely computeresque; recognizable for what it is, makeable no other way. Maybe it will incorporate some way of expressing the uniqueness of each individual image, print by print and screening by screening.

As they declared themselves *Impressionists* or *Expressionists*, artists may declare themselves *Computerists*. My cousin may prove correct, on the issue of identifiable style. But the character of that style—whether ultra-machine or super-human—is unknown. My cousin may prove correct in ways and to a depth unimagined.

The author's first articles on computergraphics animation appeared in the December 1976 issue of Popular Photography. *His publisher on this topic during the early 1980s was Audiovisual Directions.*