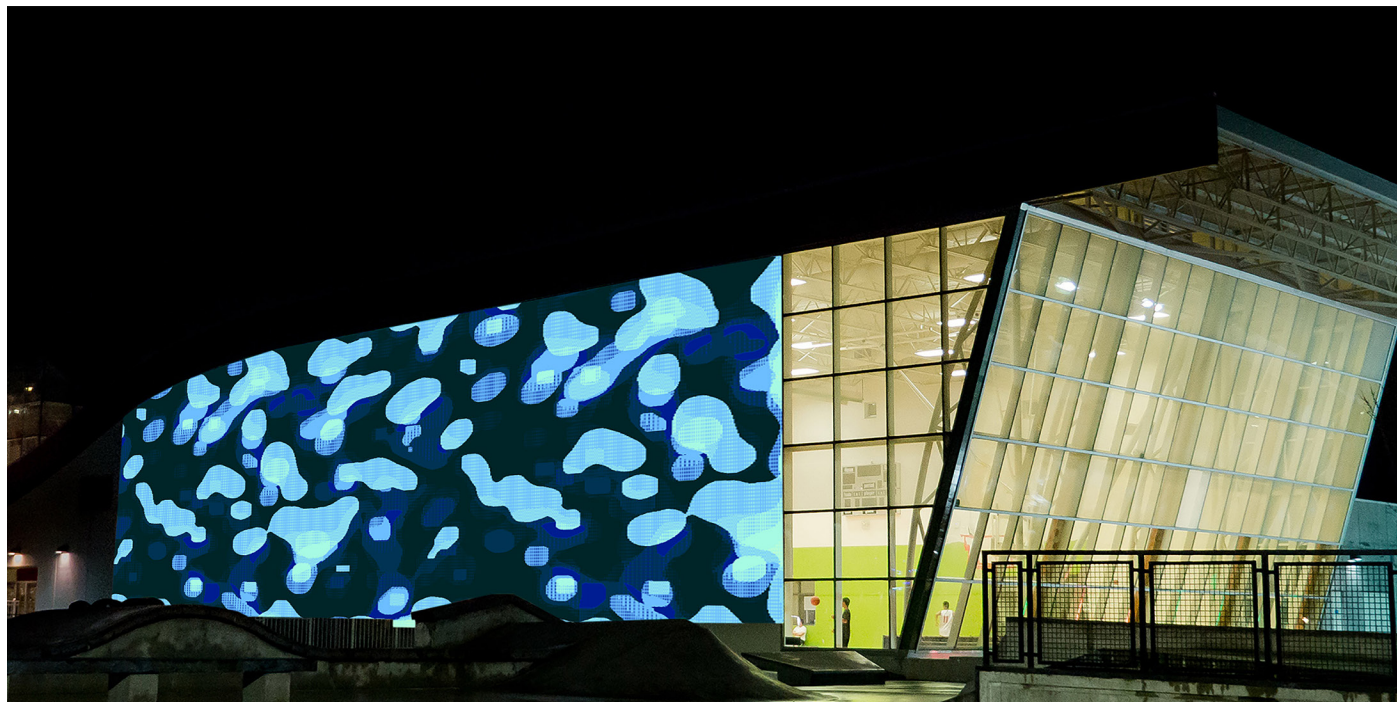


Nicolas Sassoon

LIQUID LANDSCAPES



Dreaming the Pixel Imaginary BY RHYS EDWARDS

Biographies
NICOLAS SASSOON
RHYS EDWARDS

Nicolas Sassoon
Serpentine River, still from
Liquid Landscapes, 2018

digital animation

Image courtesy of the artist

Dreaming the Pixel Imaginary Rhys Edwards

That pictures can be deceiving is a cliché today. Whereas we once perceived pictures to be an accurate record of the world, the ability to produce, manipulate, and share them across social networks is so straightforward that we know all too easily the ease with which it is possible to deceive. So, deception is impossible, since the subjectivity or outright falseness of the picture may be assumed in the first place. We have become too clever for our own good.



Found photograph of Boundary Bay with colour palette by Nicolas Sassoon. Original photograph by Randall St. Germain.

Our wisdom has produced a more complex relationship to pictures: though we have become skeptical of their truth, we nevertheless indulge in pictures more frequently than ever. With a kind of joy, we assiduously seek to reconstruct the world in image-form. At no point in prior history has the world ever been so saturated with images; indeed, it is more appropriate to say now that we live in an image-world of our own creation. Having untethered pictures from any indexical (i.e. directly connected) relationship to a previously distinct, autonomous reality, they now occupy a new realm for us. Regardless of any particular content, pictures have become suggestions: speculative forays into an attitude, an emotion, a politic, a taste, or activity.

The art of Nicolas Sassoon traces this movement from the indexical to the speculative. Using a pixel aesthetic originating from computer art and web design of the 1990s, his images of hypothetical architecture, reconstructed studio and gallery interiors, and imaginary landscapes all allude to an imminent reality that is never realized. Conversely, his *Patterns* series of pixel animations employ the use of movements inspired by sights, materials, and natural phenomena drawn from the real world in order to generate totally abstract compositions.

Liquid Landscapes, Sassoon's site-specific project for UrbanScreen, conjoins these two modes of making. The artwork consists of seven different

animations, one for each night of the week. Each animation is inspired by a real-life geographic site located somewhere in the city of Surrey; locales include Boundary Bay, Crescent Beach, Fraser River, Nicomekl River, Redwood Park, Serpentine River and Serpentine Fen. The animations reference patterns of natural phenomena likely to be found at each site, such as the movement of waves upon the beach, raindrops landing on still bodies of water, the reflection of light, and the growth of plants throughout the seasons. The colour palette of each animation is derived from a single found photograph of each location.

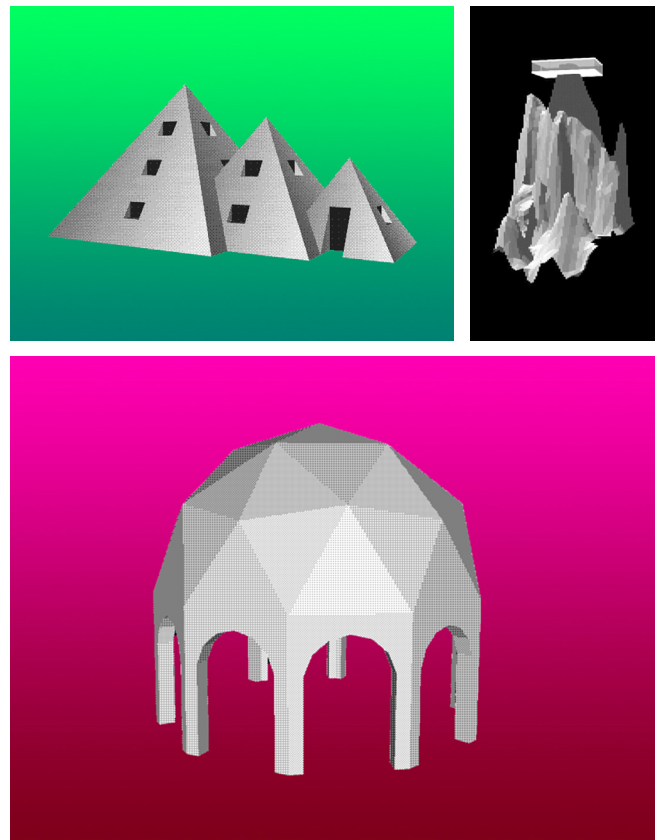
Crucially, as each animation proceeds, its composition and movement pattern changes. Consortiums of pixels that had previously read as seeds, sunrays, or shadows begin to disperse and fragment; rhythms which had matched a single tempo speed up or slow down. Almost imperceptibly, each animation deconstructs itself into its discrete elements, and we are slowly shown that what we have been looking at is not a truly figurative image, but is merely symbolic—and always has been.

It is telling that Sassoon's early digital works were intended to be models for three-dimensional sculptures that were never ultimately realized, such as his *PYRAMIDES*, *GEODES*, and *HOMES* series. Each animation in *Liquid Landscapes* captures something seemingly essential about an area of Surrey, and vividly helps to bring this aspect of local geography to life. But the gradual transformation of each animation, from a documentarian record of a real place and moment to a total abstraction, alludes to the subsumption of reality within picture-making.

Could Serpentine Fen, Nicomekl River, or Boundary Bay ever be “known”? We may certainly visit each location and glean something of its character,

but the experiential element of nature walks is subjective, distinct to each visitor. As such, the pictures we take or make from each site become part of the composite assembly of documents (albums, portfolios, books, websites) through which we develop an understanding of place. Over time, these grand composites gain a life of their own—abstracted, universalized, and independent of origin. They become speculative models for a world which might exist, rather than the one we actually inhabit.

Sassoon's use of seemingly dated image-rendering techniques also compounds the effect of distancing from the geographic source. The shimmering pixels call to mind the screensavers of a long-forgotten computer operating system, which primes us to perceive the subject as outmoded in some way—as if it is being transmitted to us from a prior era.



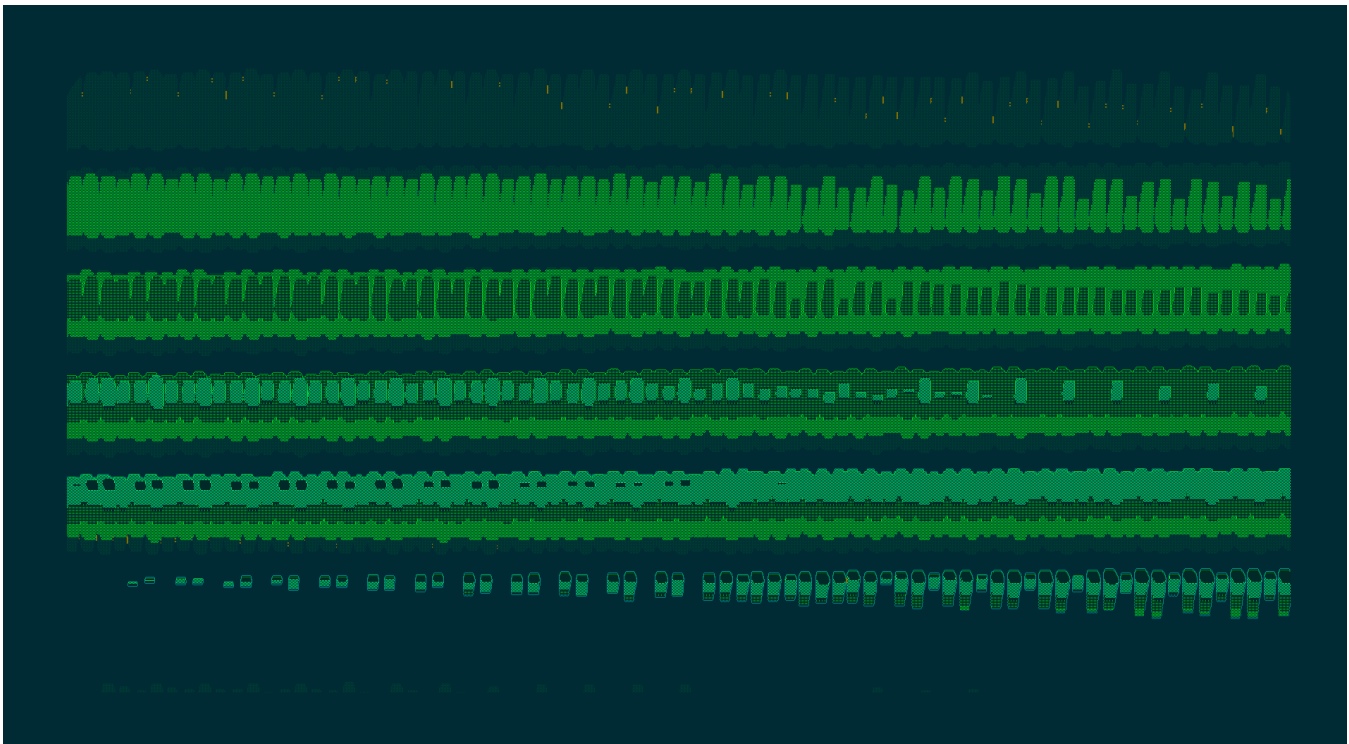
Stills from *PYRAMIDES*, *HOMES*, and *GEODES*, 2010. Images courtesy of Nicolas Sassoon.

But pixel art also has a secondary, deeper meaning: unlike other art media, the figurative capacities of the pixel are limited only by processing power. Pixels are the palpable building blocks of computer software which, in time, may come to simulate entire realities. They hold therein the promise of unlimited possibility, of virtual utopia. Pixels connote more clearly than any other medium the modelling of reality. Thus Sassoon's use of pixels is not only visually appealing (although it is certainly that too), but a way of making explicit the underlying processes through which images transform the world in the digital era. In other words, the supposedly "kitsch" qualities of 90s web aesthetics are only the first primordial cries of the all-dominating graphics technology that powers the advertisements, sports replays, weather reports, games, and movies we consume today.

It is important to note that the distancing Sassoon introduces into his image-world, through the gradual shift into abstraction and the explicit use of pixel art,

does not imply that his symbolic rendition of each site is inaccurate or misleading. Rather, it mirrors the "real-life" abstraction of Surrey. For many, Surrey itself is a speculative place. Rapidly shifting and growing, the city invites investment in its future. Further, as one of the largest metropolitan regions in Canada, the breadth of the City makes many of its parks and rivers accessible to the general populace only from a distance; citizens are more likely to identify with individual neighbourhoods than with the City as a whole. The pictures found upon UrbanScreen are further iterations of the same images found upon the internet; regardless of the source, they exist at a remove.

In this way, *Liquid Landscapes* captures the tensions underlying the continuum between reality, nature, place-making, and picture-making. Hypnotic and enticing, Sassoon's art does not show us the world as it actually is, but does disclose the means via which it is delivered to us.



Serpentine Fen, still from *Liquid Landscapes*, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist.

About the Artist

Nicolas Sassoon employs early computer imaging techniques to render a wide array of forms and figures, encoded visually using pixelated patterns and animation. This focus on early computer graphics is driven by the sculptural, material and pictorial qualities of this imagery, as well as its limitations and its poetics. Sassoon's work explores the contemplative, fantastical and projective dimensions of screen-based space, and how the digital image can express dimensions of the physical realm. While most of his output is published online, Sassoon also materializes his web-based practice into a wide range of media. His visual research often leads him to engage in cross-disciplinary projects in the fields of architecture, electronic music, textiles, and art. Nicolas is a founder of the collectives W-A-L-L-P-A-P-E-R-S and SIGNALS. His work has been exhibited at The Whitney Museum of American Art (US), Eyebeam (US), Current Museum (US), Hammer Museum (US), Vancouver Art Gallery (CA), Plugin ICA (CA), Contemporary Art Gallery (CA), Charles H. Scott Gallery (CA), Western Front (CA), PRETEEN Gallery (MX), Victoria & Albert Museum (UK), the Centre d'Art Bastille (FR), Espace Multimedia Gatner (FR), House of Electronic Art Basel (SW), Arti et Amicitiae (NL), MU Eindhoven (NL), Today Art Museum (CN), the Berlin Fashion Week (DE) and the New-York Fashion Week (US).

About the Writer

Rhys Edwards is a critic, artist, and curator. He has written for *Canadian Art*, *The Capilano Review* and *BC Studies*, along with multiple Vancouver-based art blogs. In 2014 he won the *C Magazine* New Critics prize. In 2015, he co-founded the Agent C Gallery with artist Debbie Tuepah in the Newton region of Surrey. As an Assistant Curator at the Surrey Art Gallery, he has developed several exhibitions, and contributed texts and design elements to many others. He also co-authored the City of Surrey's 2015 Surrey Operations and Civic Infrastructure Art Plan with artist Alan Storey, and has published several essays about the City of Surrey's Public Art collection.



About UrbanScreen

Imagined by artists and built by the City, Surrey’s UrbanScreen is Canada’s largest non-commercial outdoor urban screen dedicated to presenting digital and interactive art. UrbanScreen is an offsite venue of the Surrey Art Gallery and is located on the west wall of Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre in City Centre. The venue can be viewed from SkyTrain, between Gateway and Surrey Central stations. Exhibitions begin 30 minutes after sunset and end at midnight.

UrbanScreen was made possible by the City of Surrey Public Art Program, with support from the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Surrey Art Gallery Association, and the BC Arts Council Unique Opportunities Program, and is a legacy of the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad project CODE. Surrey Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges funding support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of BC through the BC Arts Council for its ongoing programming. UrbanScreen’s 2015 equipment renewal was made possible by the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage / Government of Canada and the City of Surrey.

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surrey art gallery
 13750 88 Avenue
 Surrey, BC V3W 3L1
 Phone: 604-501-5566
 artgallery@surrey.ca
 www.surrey.ca/artgallery
 www.surrey.ca/urbanscreen

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