

JASON SALAVON

With an eye for telling symbols of popular culture, and a knack for blending unlikely visual data, Chicago artist Jason Salavon creates images for an information-saturated world.

By James Yood



When it comes to data, some say we're swimming in it, others say we're drowning in it; either way, one can't help but be intrigued by the aqueous metaphor, how data is like a conceptual flood that rushes over and around us, always moving, never stable, hard to grasp, changeling and quixotic, a tsunami of potentially linked material. But the structures we create to organize data, the visual platforms used to collate and rethink it, parse it to and fro, all make templates that turn chaos into pattern; whether that data is portraits by Rembrandt, a decade by decade survey of *Playboy* centerfolds, houses for sale in Seattle, the top grossing films of all time, 1967 and 1988 high school yearbook photos from Fort Worth, an IKEA catalogue, images representing good and evil, or much more. Welcome to the whirlpool data reformatter that is Jason Salavon.

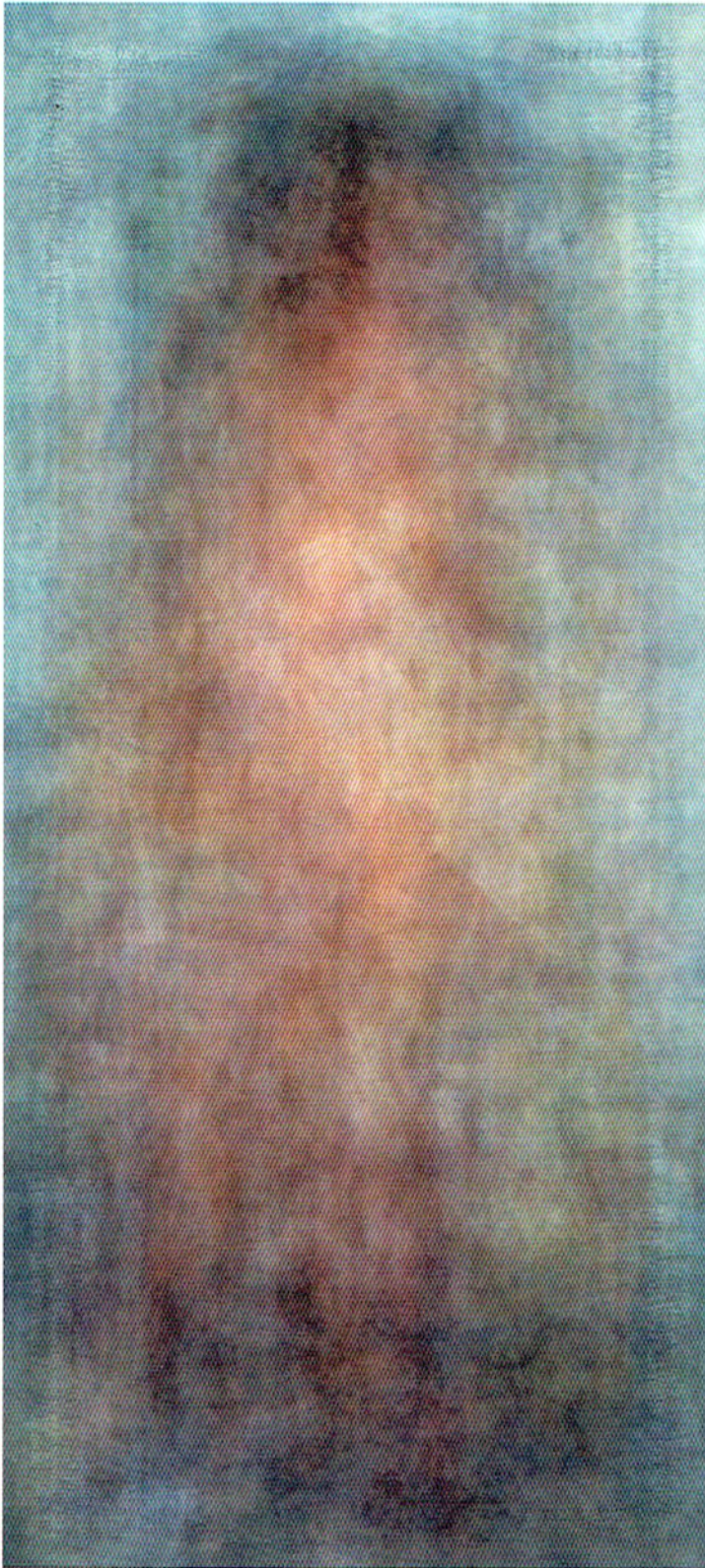
Nobody is precisely equal parts of anything, but the best way to begin thinking about Jason Salavon is to recognize that he is both a terrific artist and a highly skilled programmer and software and code designer. His current position at the University of Chicago acknowledges that—he's both a professor in its Department of Visual Arts and a Fellow at the university's Computation Institute, where they seek "to advance science through innovative computational approaches." This fall, through March 2015, he is currently on leave in Seattle, where he is Artist-in-Residence at Microsoft Research. Salavon is the second artist to receive this residency (James George was first in 2013, for a three-month residency, as distinct from Salavon's six-month appointment). The results of Salavon's sojourn will be displayed at Microsoft next Spring, and later in 2015 at Mark Moore Gallery in Los Angeles and Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York.

Raised in Texas and with a BA from the University of Texas in Austin, Salavon moved to Chicago—where he still lives and works—to pursue his MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The son of

a painter, he was, as he puts it, from the very first interested in ways to "use technology in a conceptually driven fashion," or more specifically, "to write software and code to bend and manipulate data." He still does. Salavon, in his way, got in touch with his inner geek, the techno-tinkerer who creates sophisticated and complex software to offer intriguing visual transcriptions of masses of material that interest him, none of which could not have been achieved before the age of digitization and the computer. While he'll indulge in thinking about rather mundane streams of data—one excellent piece by him is *Shoes, Domestic Production 1960-98*, (2001), which turns statistics about shoe production in the US into a psychedelical visual maelstrom—Salavon's really a culture hawk, particularly attentive to mass culture as a ubiquitous vernacular language that inexorably displays the predilections, obsessions, and mannerisms of our time.

Salavon worked through some of his programming core moves from around 1997 until 2010. In particular, two of those processes—blending and averaging—have been important to him from the start. In blending (he usually refers to this as "amalgamation") he takes similarly sized digital images of linked material—in different instances, portraits by Velazquez, Rembrandt, and others, children posed with Santa, late night talk show hosts doing their monologues, homes for sale in different cities, *Playboy* centerfolds, etc.—each with a fairly similar format and structure, and writes code to seamlessly superimpose a number of them atop each other (Salavon usually aims for about 100 images to make one amalgamation, though that varies).

ABOVE:
"374 FARBEN," 2007
DIGITAL C-PRINT, LIGHT BOX
36½" x 84½" x 6½"
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



"EVERY PLAYBOY CENTERFOLD, THE 1960S (NORMALIZED)," 2002
DIGITAL C-PRINTS
60" x 29¼"



"EVERY PLAYBOY CENTERFOLD, THE 1970S (NORMALIZED)," 2002
DIGITAL C-PRINTS
60" x 29¼"

Most often, the resulting medium is a Digital C-print, although recently he moved on to archival inkjet prints, and particularly in projects involving TV or movies, Salavon frequently works in video as well.

In each case, he creates a kind of Ur-image, a democratic blending that while obliterating the specifics of any single component sometimes reveals new aspects of its underlying structure. Sometimes it doesn't—100 blended photos of a store Santa with a child on his lap becomes pretty much a blurry version of each individual image. But more often than not Salavon uncovers meaning in the mean; in *Homes for Sale* (1999/2001/2002), he selected six communities from around the US and blended photos of houses for sale there, that were at that community's median price range. The six resulting images, almost in spite of themselves, affirm things we might have already guessed—that the sky is usually gray in Seattle, that in Chicago and New York most houses are two-story with pitched roofs, that in LA, Dallas and Miami it's sunny and most mid-priced homes are single story. A real estate photo is still data, and data can always be analyzed for inclinations it may not immediately suggest.

In his *Every Playboy Centerfold, The Decades (Normalized)*, (2002), Salavon took all the centerfolds from 1960s, '70s, '80s and '90s, 120 per decade, and blended them into four images each representing a 10-year span. Salavon's images tells us what we might have deduced,

that a centerfold is a vertical nude figure displaying her body to the viewer, but there are cultural subtleties encased within his inquiry—the centerfolds from the 1960s had darker hair than their successors, and often turned their faces and bodies somewhat away from the camera, a bit more demure in pose. The subsequent decades document a progressive increase in blond hair, and a more assertive and brightly lit full frontal display of the body. In his blends Salavon often deals with outlier data; about 10% of *Playboy* centerfolds are presented horizontally, and in those cases Salavon rotated them to the vertical and notes: "Most visual outliers are subsumed by the mass."

Salavon's other method of organizing data throughout his career has been through averaging, either by determining the dominant color in his source material or by assessing its light/dark nature. In *The Top Grossing Film of All Time 1 x 1* (2000), Salavon designed code to take every frame in a digital version of James Cameron's *Titanic*—a total of 336,247 frames—and present each solely displaying its dominant color. He arranged these hundreds of thousands of little monochromatic frames in order, left to right, in thin rows from top to bottom, presenting a linear narrative that's surprisingly easy to follow—blue or darkish blue lines depict moments concentrating on the ocean or sky, brownish and tan moments interior scenes of the ship, black for exterior night scenes, a few pure white frames for the iceberg, etc. It's a visual mathematical transcription as



offering a parallel way of seeing, acknowledging the popularity of the film (*Titanic* would be supplanted as the highest grossing film of all time a few years later by *Avatar*, Cameron's next film.)

Another way of rearticulating a film is to program it in terms of the light/dark balance of each second of it. That's what Salavon did in *The Grand Unification: Part One: Every Second of Star Wars*, (1997), where each of the 7,500 seconds in the 125-minute film is separately displayed as a tiny rectangle, radiating out from the center where the brightest and lightest seconds are congregated, to the edges of the work where the dimmest and darkest seconds are placed.

There's no effort in this work to retain any narrative flow (it's from a series of four, the other films being *Deep Throat*, *Snow White*, and *It's a Wonderful Life*—that last, a black and white film), organizing it by light and dark makes it lurch about. Yet you can still make out the subject of each second, as you can't in the more linear *Titanic* piece. Either way, Salavon's processes always interpose and frustrate their data, working them toward ends their creators did not intend, reformatting them into data, and into art.

In recent years Salavon has been intrigued by a variety of things, *374 Farben*, (2007), color averages each of the 374 pages of the 2007 IKEA catalogue and displays the 374 colors as a digital C-Print in a 7-foot long light box. He notes that with 175 million copies of the catalogue distributed in 2006, the IKEA catalogue may have supplanted the Bible as the most published book of our time. He's also been fascinated by Google and Wikipedia searches; *<Color> Wheel*, (2012), which actually uses Bing as its search engine, due to broader capability of downloading material, shows in a circular segmented wheel the results of his queries for imagery for the color terms Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Violet and their intervening half tones. *The Master Index*, (2014), is, in order, a listing of the 5,000,000 most visited Wikipedia articles in English visited between December 2007 and November 2013, by page view or alphabetically (Facebook is #1 in visits, Clayton Marks—a Chicagoan, oddly enough—is #5,000,000; Jason Salavon is #639,247). Salavon noted that displaying this piece in full other than on his website (www.salavon.com) "would cover twenty 25-foot walls at 8 pt. font—I like that."

And so to Microsoft. When I spoke to Salavon about his residency he downplayed the technological aspects of what it would offer him, and noted that while computers have gotten much faster over the past fifteen years or so, their templates are pretty much the same. "The residency will provide philosophical, cultural, and some technical grist for my mill," Salavon explains. "I'm being treated as a peer with a different perspective, that of an artist with computational skills and awareness. It's been an open situation in that there are no stated restrictions—I'm free to pursue my normal art-making agendas. What is different is that I'm embedded with hundreds of brilliant scientists working in the trenches at the forefront of computational method and thought. I'm excited about what will come from this exchange."

As to the specific project he will attempt there, with the caveat that he has months left to go and things might change, he replies, "One question I've been considering the last few months: what would Pieter Bruegel the Elder or Hieronymus Bosch do with contemporary computation? Would they be art directors at Weta Workshop, doing crowd scenes for Lord of the Rings films? What else could they do? Something more unexpected? (Think Bruegel meets Busby Berkeley meets the Cloud)." I wish I could have thought of uniting Bruegel, Berkeley and the Cloud, but spinning those connections are best left to the likes of Salavon. An embrace of the computer and what it can be coaxed to do is to think about the path we're all rushing headlong into anyway. It's curiously comforting to think that while Jason Salavon is an artist who certainly looks ahead, he's equally an artist with a keen ability to look around, and look back.

"<COLOR> WHEEL," 2012
ARCHIVAL INKJET
54" x 54"

ERIC ORR Paintings

November 1 - December 31



Untitled, 1997, oil on canvas, lead sheeting on wood frame, 15.5x13"

The exhibition will feature 21 works by historic artist, Eric Orr (1939-1998), including the series *Zero Mass* and notable paintings from the *Light and Space Movement*.

This exhibition is in conjunction with The Estate of Eric Orr.

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