From Pixar to Beyoncé: Celebrating 30 Years of Pioneering Computer Art

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by Alexander Gelfand

This fall, the **MFA Computer Art Department** at SVA is celebrating its 30th anniversary. Launched in 1986, the graduate program—the first in its field—now claims more than 1,100 artists, animators, designers and programmers as alumni. These alumni have gone on to direct and animate award-winning films, create innovative works of digital art, and more.

To commemorate this milestone, MFA Computer Art is presenting [an exhibition of alumni work](#)—on view from Saturday, October 22, through the end of November at the SVA Flatiron Gallery and Flatiron Project Space, with a reception on October 28 at the MFA Computer Art Lab, all at 133/141 West 21st Street. The department is also producing a video documentary on some of the program's more notable graduates; it premieres December 1 at [mfaca.sva.edu](#), and the trailer appears above.

To further mark this anniversary, and to demonstrate the breadth of achievement of the department's alumni, we asked eight MFA Computer Art graduates to select and talk about one of their favorite works. The results are presented here, and in the fall 2016 issue of *Visual Arts Journal*, the College's alumni magazine.

[John F. Simon](#) (1989)
***Expanded Palette,* 2016, high-density urethane, medium-density fiberboard, Flashe and acrylic.**

Expanded Palette is a wall-mounted sculpture that emerged from artist John Simon's daily drawing practice, a meditation-like exercise in improvised sketching that has provided the fodder for all of his recent work. (His book on the subject, *33 Practices at the Crossroads of Art and Meditation*, is due out November 1 from Parallax Press.) The composition on which *Palette* was based belongs to a group of what Simon calls his "expansion drawings," which symbolically represent the breaking of limits—whether of color and form, or of our planet's natural resources. Trained as both an artist and a geologist, he has long been sensitive to environmental issues.

Simon himself has been pushing boundaries—those of computer-assisted art—for a long time. A pioneer of software art, he taught himself to write code in the early days of PCs, created his own animated drawing tools, transformed desktop computers into works of art that used algorithms of his own design to generate ever-changing images, and eventually moved into fabrication, writing programs to control laser cutters and automated routers in order to produce pieces like this one.

For *Expanded Palette*, the artist scanned his original drawing, converted it into a 3D shape on his computer, and then fed that shape to the automated router in his studio. The router carved the piece from a two-inch block of high-density urethane, after which Simon sanded and painted it. "It's all just one piece of material," he says.

Alexander Gelfand has contributed to The Economist, The New York Times *and* Wired, *among other publications. A version of this article appears in the fall 2016 issue of* Visual Arts Journal.