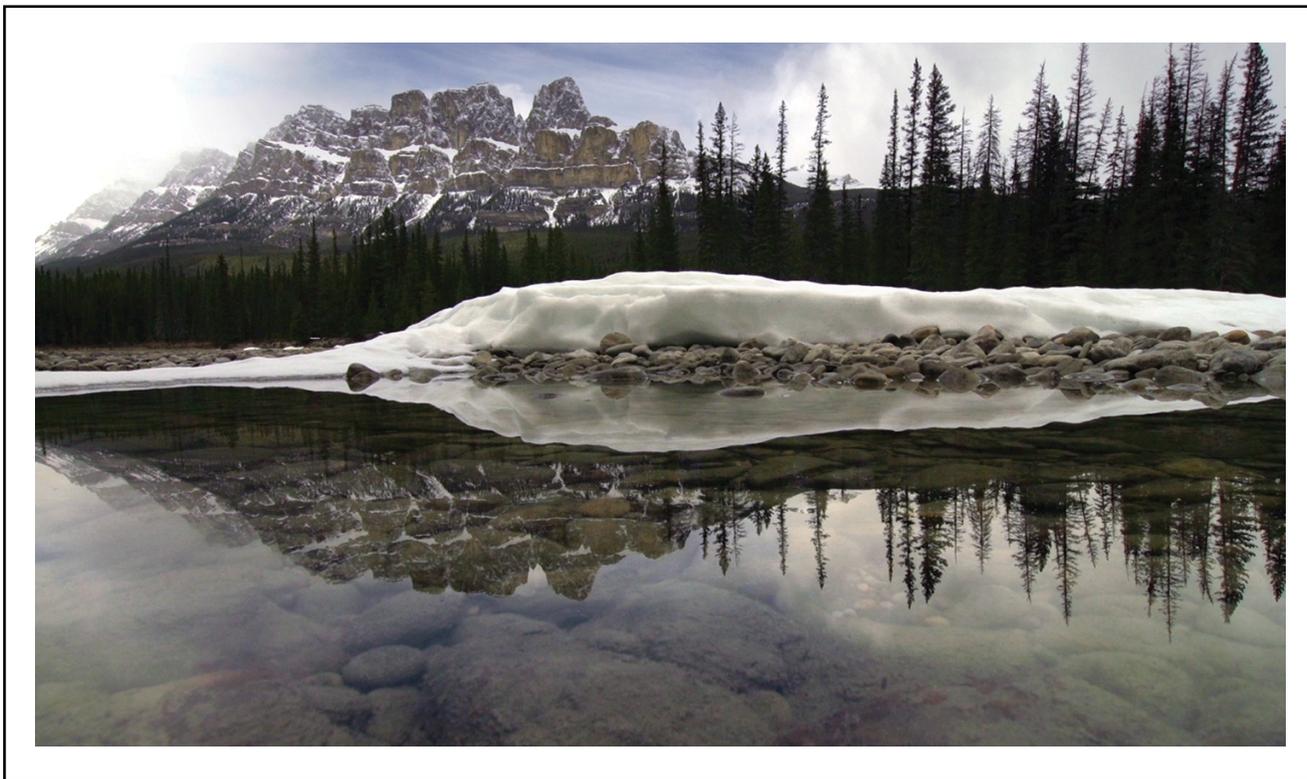


Jim Bizzocchi

AMBIENT LANDSCAPES



Introduction BY RHYS EDWARDS

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Artist Biography

Jim Bizzocchi
Still from *Triptych:*
Ambient Landscapes,
2018

Generative audiovisual
installation

Cinematography by Glen
Crawford

Introduction

Rhys Edwards
Assistant Curator

Is it possible to imagine nature?

The very concept of nature is loaded with the weight of history. It is a human construct; we perceive nature only in relation to the self and its environs. It manifests as an 'other' to whatever can be known and quantified. This other is a desirable other, that we attempt to delineate within the perspectival vision of the human realm. We wish to inhabit nature, because it represents a possibility beyond

the routine reality which we inhabit. But the nature we imagine is not truly beyond us; it usually arrives in the form of images that we have already composed, metaphorical luggage that we bring with us on our 'encounters' with nature.

Jim Bizzocchi's *Ambient Landscapes* present us with a vision of nature. This vision does not deign to be any more 'authentic' than any other, but it does modify the processes via which nature typically arrives in our sight, in a manner to which we are not accustomed. Bizzocchi's art calls up images of British Columbia and Alberta's majestic environment: forests, rivers, and mountains. Yet, it is not Bizzocchi himself who controls our exposure to these images, but an algorithmic program he has developed with a team of collaborators. As such, the presentation is semi-random; images arrive within our vision according to criteria which are not immediately evident.

This mode of image delivery is different from other modes within visual culture, whether they be those of visual art or mass media. Nature is typically curtailed and reduced, often rendered as merely symbolic, and frequently fixed within the frame of the image, moving or otherwise. Further, the presentation of such images is often motivated by personal desire.

The presentation of Bizzocchi's images is motivated too, but not by a human. As such, they exist at a remove from the agency of both artist and viewer, in an ambivalent space between the anthropomorphic and the other. They represent a newer other, one

which is becoming increasingly more dominant in our world: the algorithm, which operates beneath the level of consciousness and beyond our control. Yet, whereas the malicious aspects of algorithms are more salient than ever, Bizzocchi's algorithm is considerably more beneficent—albeit indirectly. Its objective is to present us with beautiful images, yet it denies us the ability to control or predict them. It eschews the human dimension of algorithmic interaction, and indeed, does not even demand our attention; the work is generative, continuing regardless.

The abandonment of user control has two outcomes: firstly, it mirrors the self-sufficiency of nature in itself, i.e., the fact that nature cannot be reconciled by the impositions of human agency, and that it does not exist to be understood, captured, or measured. Secondly, it contravenes the tendencies of mass digital culture, which relentlessly insists on our attention, demands our response (in the form of retweets, likes, star ratings, customer satisfaction surveys, and etcetera), and implicates us in vast data-sharing networks.

Instead, *Ambient Landscapes* invites a brief moment of solace in the perpetual pressure to negotiate the tastes of an avaricious society. We may take pleasure from the sight of the natural world, but in its ever-changing form, we are relinquished of the burden of having to make it our own. Here, effervescence is a form of release.



Jim Bizzocchi, stills from *Triptych: Ambient Landscapes*, 2018, generative audiovisual installation. Cinematography by Glen Crawford.

Artist's Statement

Jim Bizzocchi

My passion is the moving image—at its most fundamental level. I love the visual dynamics of the frame and what it shows. The frame of the moving image is a window into a visual world of its own—a window selected and honed by the filmmaker at the moment of recording. In the act of creating these windows, filmmakers and cinematographers are actually selecting and collecting specific moments in time and space. In the process, they actively shape these moments through camera placement, composition, lighting, and in-camera technical manipulation. These carefully created windows into space and time are further modified in post-production. The filmmaker and the editor massage and sometimes transform each image, and then place the modified images into specific sequences in order to create meaning. Sound and music are folded into the work as it finds its shape. This process—and the results—fascinate me.

I've worked as a filmmaker, video producer, and cinematographer for over fifty years. My earlier works were traditional documentary and educational films and videos, and I am proud of these accomplishments. Much of my current work is in a different direction however. For the last 15 years I have been fascinated by a genre I call "Ambient Video." An inspiration for this genre is Brian Eno, who has produced ambient videos of his own, but is more famous for his work in ambient music. Eno said of ambient music that "...it must be as ignorable as it is interesting."¹ At the turn of our new millenium, I became fascinated with the creative potential of emerging video technologies—in particular the large flat-panel displays in conjunction with the new high-definition visual standards. It was obvious even then

that these large higher-resolution television frames would increasingly dominate our living rooms, business lobbies, and public spaces. What would these ubiquitous frames be used for when we were not watching television or home theater? I believed that one use would be the presentation of beautiful moving image visuals—like fine-art photography, but acting as a living window into a world outside our daily routine. These moving visuals would play in the background of our lives, but be available whenever we wanted a break from the usual and the everyday.

This is Ambient Video. For my own work, I adapted Brian Eno's dictum that an ambient medium must be as easy to ignore as it is to notice. My own aesthetic for ambient video art has three rules:

- my ambient video must never require your attention
- my ambient video must always reward your attention with visual pleasure
- because it will live in our homes and work spaces, my ambient video must sustain its visual pleasure over repeated viewing

My ambient video art is resolutely non-narrative. Narrative is fundamentally inconsistent with ambient experience. A story will seize and hold our attention, and ambient art should never do this. Ambient video is also slow paced. Fast motion and fast cutting also attract our attention in a manner that contradicts the ambient aesthetic. My ambient art is based in nature and the environment—content that is consistent with the ambient, and also well suited to fill a video frame within our overwhelmingly urban lifestyles.

Ambient video has become a central creative direction for me, but it's not my own invention. Long before the introduction of flat-panel display and HD resolution standards, filmmakers and video producers created

ambient moving image works. The classic piece, of course, is the venerable Christmas TV Yule Log. From its introduction at WPIX New York in 1966, the Yule Log has burned on Christmas Eve broadcasts all over world for over fifty years. Last Christmas Eve there were a dozen Yule Logs burning on various channels in our local cable lineup. In fact, Shaw Cable goes even further than most—it starts running its own Yule Log during American Thanksgiving, and airs it continuously until the second week in January! The ambient video form has never disappeared. Some current examples include the ongoing Shaw Cable Frame channel, Norwegian and English television’s “slow film” programming, innumerable aquarium videos, VJ-based visual art, and a host of live web feeds such as the “eagle-cam” egg-hatchings.

However, some of this ambient video is not art, it is kitsch. Many current examples show ambient video material, but lack any real aesthetic context

or artistic accomplishment. I see my own ambient videos as artworks, incorporating a series of creative interventions into their conception and development. The first intervention is strong visual composition, which is the foundation of my ambient aesthetic. Since my ambient videos are slow-paced, the compositions must support extended screen time. My shots are typically a minute long, so strong visual interest is an imperative. The second intervention is my manipulation of time to enhance visual impact. I treat the flow of time as a plastic variable. Some shots, such as cloud images, I will speed up in post-production. Other shots, such as moving water, I slow down. In a few images, I will speed up time in one part of the shot, and slow it down in other parts. The third intervention is my treatment of the transition from one shot to the next. In a typical film, the overwhelming majority of the edits are hard cuts—immediately going from one image to



Jim Bizzocchi, stills from *Triptych: Ambient Landscapes*, 2018, generative audiovisual installation. Cinematography by Glen Crawford.



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the next with no transition at all. Very occasionally standard cinema and video might use a dissolve, and even more rarely, a wipe transition. In my ambient video, there are no hard cuts at all. Every shot uses a complex transition to gradually evolve into the next shot. This reliance on an ongoing series of complex visual changes is a hallmark of my work.

The subject matter for my ambient video is the natural environment. Like most people, I love nature, and I love walking in the natural world. I find immediate visual interest and more lasting soul-restoring perspective when I am immersed in the mountains or the forests. With my ambient video art, I get to work in beautiful places, and then reconstruct and relive these landscapes in order to build my artworks. I don't actively position my work as making environmental statements, but those values are central to the making of my art, and I believe to the experience of the artworks.

I started a fresh approach to the making of this nature-based ambient video about ten years ago. I very much enjoy making ambient videos using traditional human-based editing techniques, but I began to wonder about other ways to produce an ambient visual experience. I have taught film and video for over thirty years, and have always loved teaching the craft of editing and post-production—the ability to sequence and transform the moving image. This concern with how films are made is central to who I am. My teaching, my scholarship, and my art are all

built upon a commitment to understanding the details of creative cinematic decision-making. In this spirit, I began to wonder if I could build a computational system that would incorporate human editing skills, and use these skills to create its own versions of ambient video.

This process was an exercise in generative art. Generative art is a long-standing but little understood genre of art creation. It predates the computer, and it has been claimed that it is “as old as art itself.”² In generative art, the artist creates a system, and the system creates the art. My generative system is computational, using a set of algorithms to select, sequence and present shots from a database of video clips. The system emits a series of “films” based on the seasons, organized by specific content. The system runs continuously, and every season and every year is different than the others. Further variation is provided in the transitions. Every shot ends with a complex transition to the next shot. The transitions are based on luminance (brightness values) or chrominance (color values). The system also selects the transitions randomly, which adds to the variations in the sequencing.

Since generative artists create systems, which in turn create the art, the artists have to determine the type and degree of autonomy they build into the system. My own benchmark for the system's success was its ability to approach the competence of a human editor. For me therefore, all the decisions

on the design of my system reflect a careful balance between aesthetic control and degree of algorithmic variation. Increased control would constrict output variation, while increased variation could compromise the cinematic aesthetics of the output. I suspect that finding the balance between artistic control and system autonomy is central to the work of many generative artists in any medium. I certainly find it to be both challenging and fascinating.

This artwork, *Triptych: Ambient Landscapes*, combines my traditional ambient video art with my newer computationally-generative ambient video art. The triptych is a venerable art form, with a central panel and two side panels. The three panels could be a set of paintings, carvings, photographs, or video screens. The three panels are meant to explore different aspects of a common theme, and the implicit commentary between the screens is a central characteristic of this form. In my triptych,

the central panel shows continuous screenings of two of my traditionally produced ambient videos: *Winterscape* and *Cycle*. The side screens show the output from my computationally generative ambient video system. The visuals on the side screens are identical but mirrored. The combined triptych artwork shows the similarities and the differences between my traditional ambient videos and my generative artwork. The theme of nature and the commitment to natural beauty and visual transition is shared across the components of the work. The central screen highlights the commitment to detail, flow and unity that human creators can bring to the creative process. The side screens show the variation, unpredictability, and surprise that generative algorithms can provide.

I've been talking about myself in this discussion, but that ignores the work of my associates in every phase of my art. My traditional ambient videos were based on a collaboration with a gifted cinematographer,



Installation view of *Jim Bizzocchi: Ambient Landscapes* at Surrey Art Gallery. Photograph by Surrey Art Gallery.

Glen Crawford, and an equally gifted video post-production specialist, Chris Bizzocchi. My generative system is enhanced because it communicates in real time with the generative music system created by Arne Eigenfeldt. In addition, I have been lucky to work with a number of other talented cinematographers, video editors, scholars, research assistants, and coders. These colleagues are listed in the detailed credits of the exhibit. In all my creative work, I have benefited from the input of my wife and partner Justine Bizzocchi. Her input has been particularly important for this artwork. She has been heavily involved with the installation process, and has worked tirelessly to ensure that the working code has the reliability and sophistication needed to create an ongoing generative video experience.

Notes

1. Eno, Brian, *Music for Airports*, PVC 7908 (AMB 001) album liner notes, 1978.
2. Galanter, P. (2003) *What is Generative Art? Complexity Theory as a Context for Art Theory*. Proceedings of the 6th Generative Art Conference, Milan, Italy.

About the Artist

Jim Bizzocchi is a British Columbia moving image artist. His *Ambient Video* series of artworks (www.ambientvideo.ca) explores a new video genre. Bizzocchi has produced a series of ambient video artworks in traditionally edited video form. He has also built a generative computational system that sequences video shots without human intervention. This system uses the rules and processes he has designed to present an ongoing stream of ambient video imagery. Bizzocchi is currently in the process of redesigning and extending the system so that it will produce generative moving image works that are in the spirit of classic documentary forms.

As an Associate Professor at Simon Fraser University, Bizzocchi's research includes the evolving aesthetics of the digital moving image, the creation of generative video systems, and the design of interactive narrative. He is an accomplished instructor and a recipient of Simon Fraser's Excellence in Teaching Award. He is widely published in scholarly journals, books, and academic conferences. His traditional and his computational video artworks have also received extensive international exhibition, including Australia, China, the United Kingdom, and many sites in Canada and the United States. Bizzocchi has received successive research and creation grants from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) to explore the design of computationally-driven video, sound, and music. This ongoing project has already resulted in a series of generative video artworks and a number of scholarly papers.

Jim Bizzocchi: Ambient Landscapes

This publication documents the exhibition *Jim Bizzocchi: Ambient Landscapes*, held at the Surrey Art Gallery from February 4th 2018 to January 27th 2019, and was curated by Rhys Edwards.

This work involves the contributions from a number of individuals and institutions that the artist would like to thank.

Generative work:

Video Concept and Design: Jim Bizzocchi

Audio Concept and Design: Arne Eigenfeldt

Director of Photography: Glen Crawford

Additional videography: Jim Bizzocchi, Samantha Derochie, Jeremy Mamisao, Julian Giordano, Jenni Rempel, Adrian Bisek

Video Post-production: Samantha Derochie, Justine Bizzocchi

Software Development (Video): Le Fang, Justine Bizzocchi, Brady Marks, Paul Paroczai

Software Development (Sound): Arne Eigenfeldt

Cycle (2009) and Winterscape (2007):

Producer/Director: Jim Bizzocchi

Director of Photography: Glen Crawford

Additional videography: Jim Bizzocchi

Editing visual effects, and soundscape: Chris Bizzocchi

Additional support: Banff New Media Institute and SFU School of Interactive Art+Technology.

Triptych: Ambient Landscapes is part of the Generative Media Project at Simon Fraser University.

Principal Investigator: Jim Bizzocchi

Co-Investigators: Arne Eigenfeldt, Philippe Pasquier

Collaborators: Tom Calvert, William Uricchio

Support for the SFU Generative Media Project has been provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [SSHRC], with additional support from the GRAND NCE and the School of Interactive Arts + Technology at Simon Fraser University.

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