@alter.gram:
A Conversation with Alex Alter

On his website, Alex Alter outlines the context of his work:

> *Canadians live within a two-language system and in multi-cultural communities, where often there is no clear common ground for expression. But memory of place and surroundings—through which we form connections—is as much a part of our language as the spoken word. This memory of place can itself become a language, a visual native tongue, creating a line of sight within a greater whole.*

He continues, describing his working methods:

> *Alter approaches his work by using a 'montage palette'. Interrupting and re-adapting conventional approaches, he melds photography, drawing and painting through computer software. His current process is one of cross-pollination of the physical, the vernacular and the symbolic aspects of an image. Through visual cues and the use of recurring motifs, Alter's work connects and juxtaposes images and image fragments, each of which enhances the others' strengths and their unique rhythms.*
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> *These unique rhythms are akin to elements in music, or to cinematic montage: a golden thread of similarities, connections and comparisons is formed. Whether in art, music or cinema… interpretations of metaphor, rhythm and image can be montaged onto modern evolving narratives. Alter believes this is all reflected and sourced back to our multicultural societies as they emerge and evolve.*
> [from www.alexanderalter.net]

There are four of these narratives on Alter's website—*Pop Myth, Past & Future, Fiction & Non-Fiction,* and *Native Tongue*—and reviewing them in order, one can see his sense of narrative construction continually expanding. *Pop Myth* references classic myth friezes as they reference pop culture; *Past & Future* deconstructs and then reassembles a family photo album as it evolves into symbolizing a death shroud. *Fiction & Non-Fiction* explores the interface between the photographic and the abstract; and *Native Tongue* brings montage practice itself to the fore, amalgamating the drawn and the photographed with the remembered and the imagined, and forming an entirely new narrative system.

This system is even more fully developed in *@alter.gram*, which displays a continuous progression of some six hundred and eighty-seven posts, grouped three across and reading bottom to top: an astonishing work which, if printed, would be as wide as the Bayeux Tapestry, and nearly as long as an Olympic swimming pool.

Wanting to know more, I spoke with Alex during the summer and fall of 2023.

> *From early on, images captured my imagination.* My introduction to art was through the canon of western painting, and what amazed me was not the rendering in these images so much as their construction of narrative. How could these artists use visual grammar to arrange the elements of a composition so that they seemed to relate to and improve on each other? What was this complementarity?

> In my first year of college and quite by accident I came upon a book, "The Painter's Secret Geometry", by the art historian Charles Bouleau. I was hoping it would reveal these secret methods of visual composition and image construction. But unfortunately, his interpretations felt misguided, and I was left at a dead end.

> Again by accident, during my first year studying design in graduate school I encountered a monograph by the Czech graphic designer Ladislav Sutnar. I started to analyze his designs, by tracing over them and discovering their underlying grid structures. Using this book as a kind of Rosetta Stone, I compared Sutnar's work to his contemporaries to see if there were common methodologies in substructure. And there were… and it then hit me… this was a direct connection to the substructures used by artists in the past.

So this way of working could not be new, it had to have been practiced all along. As David Hockney noted in the film "Tim's Vermeer", there were secret methods that artists used which were never documented but passed on by word of mouth from artist to apprentice... examples through which apprentices would have learnt their masters' methods.

It was like writing music, where the notes relate to the musical staff: visual elements were made to relate to the space they inhabited, making connections to proportion and to eye movement. I spent at least 30 years studying and analyzing various artists, and eventually concluded that this was not just geometry, but a manifesting of early forms of gestalt theory.

When I was working on "Pop Myth" (2007 -2009), I used these same methods and underlying substructures; in a way I was replicating systems of composition used in classical paintings. But after the series was completed, I needed to get this out of my system, to prove to myself that I could do something new. I needed to step away from this mode of working... I believed it was dangerous walking too close to classicism. I told myself, you have to find your own voice to represent your own time.

I then took stock of where I was creatively and how I wanted to move forward. At the end of January 2010, my mother had just passed away and I started to create a series of landscapes about life experiences. Reflecting on this work, I realized I was mesmerized by the homogenized visual culture around me—it felt like I was constantly looking at a huge mosaic, one that combined visible and hidden meanings with an ever-present symbolism.

I openly admitted to myself that television and watching films on television had been a pivotal form of my visual education… sharing their multiple forms of narrative. The visual phrasing of moving images was more woven into my imagination than the written word.

It was extremely clear to me what filmmakers could do with lenses: they could represent duality, and there could be multiple meanings within an image sequence, or even in a single frame. Whether it came through representation or through abstraction or sound, this evolving dictation of images captured my imagination. And whether we've realized it or not, this new, complex visual language has evolved into a new universal language.

That said, we also need to represent where we come from. Growing up and being raised in Canada, I formed an appreciation for multiculturalism, learning to use language and ideas in multiple ways. To me my work will always be transparent; I can note the various cultural influences in everything I make. I now live between Toronto and Milan, and these experiences have broadened me, as have opportunities to see exhibitions from around the globe.

An image needs to attract involvement. I'm always searching for new ways to tell a story. The 20th century was about how to redefine form and visual thinking because of the camera; the 21st century is about how photographers redefine the image with modern tools. Art is not necessarily about rendering something true to form, or about injecting an artist's life into their work; I now think it's about something more personally expressive and interpretive. It's about how to use artistic license rather than being visually literal—this enables the viewer to become more involved.

So, for me, that's where my journey has taken me. It's not just using the camera, it's bringing the camera into the next chapter of its existence. What I did with Instagram was to re-think the way I sketch, and I did it as a movie, as a narrative, but using new tools to explore what I'm thinking creatively. I've used words, and symbols, but also an element of chance, which is a big part of play. And without play you cannot create.


The construction of a contemporary image is a process of exploring what the captured image can be, not stopping with the click of the shutter. In the end, there are all these forms of narrative. But the last piece of the puzzle goes back to montage. Software can give you an advantage in getting there, in getting to a final outcome. But the work has to come from you.

More of Alex Alter's work can be found at:

www.alexanderalter.net
https://www.instagram.com/alter.gram/
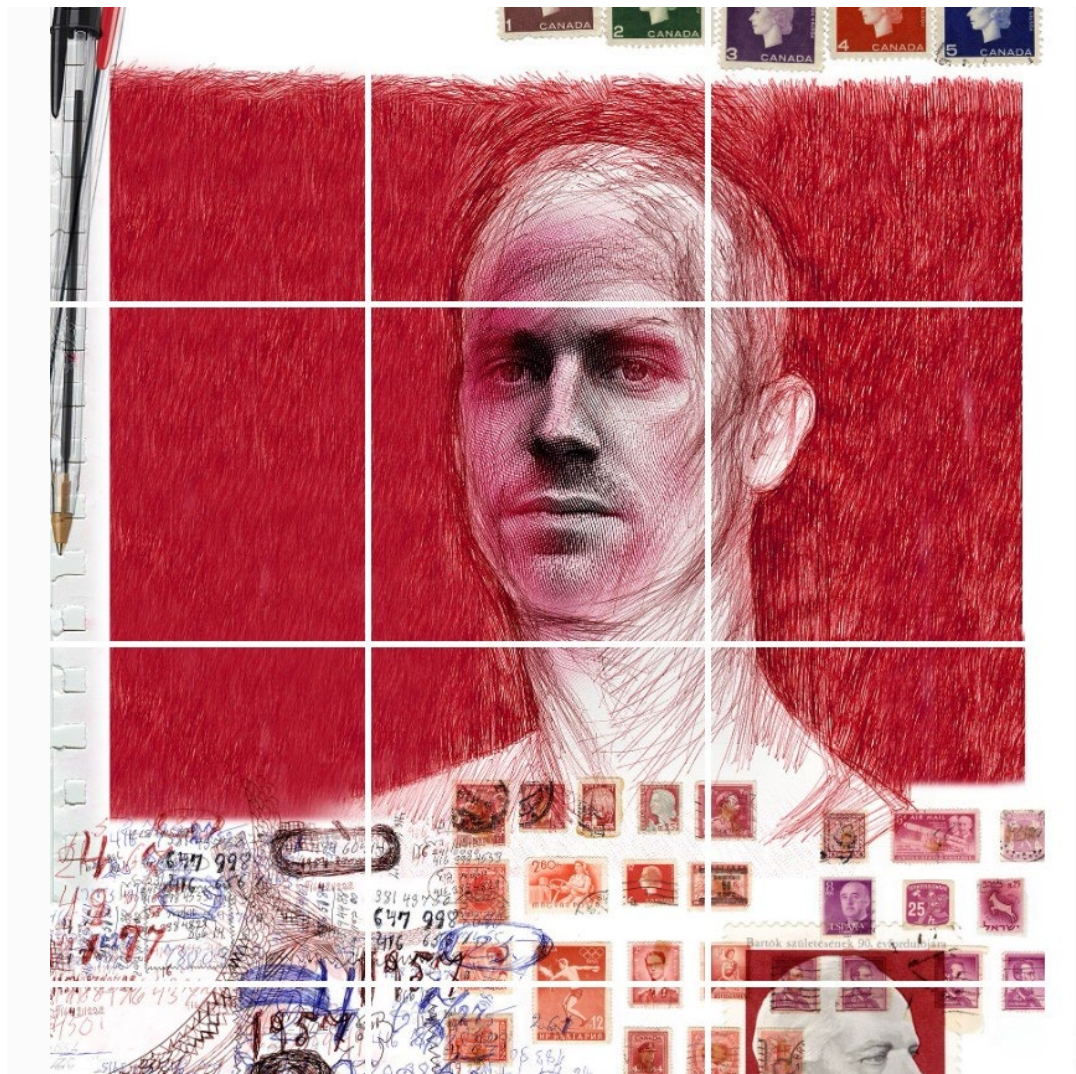
All images are frame downloads from *@alter.gram*, November, 2023