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# "Sharp Sybaritic" Retrofuturistic Deco Realism: Some Preliminary Notes on the 1980s Airbrush Art

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**“SHARP SYBARITIC” RETROFUTURISTIC DECO REALISM:  
SOME PRELIMINARY NOTES ON THE 1980S AIRBRUSH ART**

URSULA-HELEN KASSAVETI

**Abstract:** *Originating in the late 19th century, the airbrush spray gun was widely used in the mid-20th century as a photo retouch tool in advertising, while it contributed to the introduction of Photorealism in the early 1970s. The “LA scene” of the same decade popularized airbrush art through masterful illustrations. Using a variety of different representations, the 1980s airbrush art became the distinctive postmodern popular style of the decade, especially through the publication and distribution of posters and postcards, as well as in advertising. Although the 1990s saw its decline, in the late 2000s the 1980s airbrush art seems to be resurgent thanks to the Internet, providing an escapist narrative for the post-2007-2008 financial crisis landscape.*

**Resume:** *Apparu à l'origine vers la fin du XIXe siècle, l'aérographe a été largement utilisé au milieu du XXe siècle comme un outil de retouche photo dans la publicité, tout en contribuant à l'introduction du Photoréalisme au début des années 1970. Dans la même décennie, la “scène L.A.” a popularisé l'art de l'aérogaphie au travers d'illustrations magistrales qui ont déployé divers thèmes artistiques. À l'aide d'une variété de représentations différentes, l'art aérographe des années 1980 est devenu le style populaire postmoderne distinctif de la décennie. Notamment, on le reconnaît dans la publication et la distribution d'affiches ou de cartes postales, ainsi que dans la publicité. Bien que les années 1990 aient été témoins de son déclin, l'art de l'aérogaphie des années 1980 semble maintenant resurgir de l'oubli grâce à Internet, fournissant un lieu d'évasion dans le paysage de crise financière post-2007-2008.*

Shortly after the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the European debt crisis of 2008, many of us started to look back to the decades of the twentieth century, confirming, to some extent, Svetlana Boym's assertion that, "nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals" (Boym 2001 14). Trying to distance ourselves from those harder times, many of us headed towards a better "home," even if the latter was only available in the digital world. New online social platforms became the hotspot for nostalgia allowing users to dig through and collate photographic remnants of past aesthetic movements, and re-shape an image of a shinier past, part real and part imagined.

During these years of financial instability and hardship in the first and subsequent decade of the 21st century, visual imagery from the popular culture and cinema of the 1980s especially resurfaced on the internet thanks to micro-blogging platforms like Tumblr and on-line social networks that focus on images like Pinterest (Munteanu). Through a vast network of user accounts (most anonymous), Tumblr and Pinterest uploaded thousands of scans of books, postcards, and details from posters, which together present a clear and fascinating record of airbrush art from the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> New publications in art history were also encouraging a renewed interest in the longer history of airbrush art: Norman Hathaway's *Overspray: Riding High with the Kings of Airbrush* (2008), for example, shed light on the life of important airbrush artists mainly from the 1970s (Charles E. White III, Peter Palombi, David Williardson, and Peter Lloyd), and deepened airbrush enthusiasts' understanding of their influential work.

However, the long story of airbrush art could begin even earlier in the late 1960s with the use of a spray gun, which resembled the proportions of a fountain pen and had been used in the USA since 1888 (Van Hamersveld 16). This invention, attributed to Charles Burdick, could spray "pigments onto a surface without ever touching the surface itself" (Van Hamersveld 16). While airbrushing with gouache or acrylic paints, artists used masking paper to create different shapes, shadows, or color effects. As Bill Jonas, a former editor of *Airbrush Action* magazine, argued, the airbrush was ideal "for rendering subtle gradations (i.e., flesh tones) and shadows, and metallic surfaces" (8)

and for emulating “mist, light, smoke, vapor ... and beautiful blendings with the slightest pull of a trigger” (Tennant 9).

From its first use in the 1880s up until the 1980s, airbrushing has been applied in various artistic fields: fine art, advertising illustration, self-promotional art, architectural design, and technical illustration. However, it was in the late 1970s and the 1980s that airbrush became a prominent, popular style, particularly in illustration and where it became interwoven with the popular culture of the era. Its imagery consisted primarily of variations on different themes: female portraits, tropical landscapes, cars, fruits, various consumer goods, and architectural interior design. Such imagery was intertextual, as it tended to adopt and blend decorative elements from earlier aesthetic movements Art Deco, Photorealism, Memphis style, and retrofuturism. The airbrush art of the 1980s was produced by artists from various countries (the USA, UK, Italy, and Japan) as a postmodern form of expression; but it should not, at the same time, be considered as a unified artistic movement, as there were many different foci and styles located around the world.

The global popularity of 1980s airbrush art in many ways hinged on the circulation of prints and posters as an important element of interior decoration. Describing some of the decorations of 1980s homes, Wayne Hemingway remarks that:

Any chrome and tech room isn't complete without an Athena print. Athena in the 1970s and early 1980s brought affordable prints to us all. No house was complete without a red-lipped beauty sucking suggestively on a cherry, or a racy siren morphing into the bonnet of a red sports car. Prints of exotic cocktails on the window ledge of a glamorous hotel room looking onto Hong Kong Harbour, or images of Parisienne ladies with wide-brimmed hats and high heels, fulfilled dreams of foreign travel.... (26)

The purpose of this article is to provide a short historical overview of the kind of airbrush art described by Hemingway and to identify its characteristic elements and influences. My research was carried out by reviewing existing publications on American, European, and

Japanese airbrush art and its artists from the fifteen-year period (1977-1992) that witnessed the emergence, style, and applications of airbrush art as a dominant aesthetic. I also made use of a series of postcards, posters, and LPs featuring airbrush art, which were collected by three Greek collectors. These archival objects provided me with vivid paradigms of 1980s airbrush art. It should be noted, however, that it was extremely difficult to locate and make contact with other artists, and to preserve the respective rights to publish their illustration in a paper. So, inevitably, this article's focus has been narrowed to a particular set of artists and artworks; but the hope is that the ground it covers will be expanded by those who have been granted access a wider range of archives. The article explores the diffusion and popularity airbrush art achieved through the circulation of prints by companies like Athena International, which renewed and influenced the visual imagery of this popular style through their iconic and vibrant retrofuturistic posters (such as *Long Distance Kiss* by South-African illustrator Syd Brak—one of the most prominent 1980s airbrush illustrators). In conclusion, I theorize the reemergence of airbrush art in the 21st century, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "chronotope" to argue that—amid the vast image collection that comprises the Internet—nostalgic and escapist presentations of airbrush art in the post-2007-2008 landscape operate as a chronotopic habitat of 1980s prosperity.

#### AIRBRUSHING AS A TECHNIQUE: FROM THE 1920S TO PHOTOREALISM

At the beginning, airbrush was an auxiliary tool for artists and photographers; it was only later that it gradually transformed into a key element in the production of a realistic visual style. In the 20th century and, especially, during the roaring 1920s decade, the airbrush was heavily used as a photo-retouching tool. According to Van Hamersveld, the premier airbrush illustration "appeared in the New York Director's Annual in 1928" and was created by Samuel Otis (42). In Europe, and particularly in France, the interest in the "pochoir (*stencil*) printing process" resulted in various experiments with airbrushing in the fashion illustrations of the women's magazines of the era, such as *Le Gazette du Bon Ton*, and in

advertisements illustrated by artists such as A. M. Cassandre and Jean Carlu (Robinson 22-23). As Alistair Duncan observes, during this period of growing improvements in manufacturing techniques and the consequent abundance of consumer goods, advertising came to play a crucial role in developing consumer habits. In this context, minimalist posters set out on “colonnes d’affiche” in Paris with their “sharp linear compositions, floating on flat areas of background color quickly drew the eye” of potential customers (Duncan 150). Meanwhile, Bauhaus artists like László Moholy-Nagy used the tool to “soften the differences between the various elements of a photomontage” (Van Hamersveld 24; see also Kaplan 128-29 and Hariu 2-3). In succeeding decades, fashion and men’s magazines, like *Playboy* or *Esquire*, started featuring airbrush illustrations by popular artists, such as pin-up illustrator George Petty and fashion illustrator Alberto Vargas.

After facing a short decline during the 1950s (excepting its frequent use by Push Pin Studios led by graphic designers Seymour Chwast, Milton Glaser, and Edward Sorel), the airbrush began to be used again in Rock ’n’ Roll posters and was legitimized as a tool and technique in the following decade, the era of Photorealism. After going through a variety of different articulations, such as “Super-Real, Sharp-Focus, Radical Real, Hyperreal (in France), Romantic Real and Magic Real,” Photorealism was at last coined in 1968 by the American collector Louis K. Meisel (Meisel, *Photorealism* 12).<sup>3</sup> The term was first used to describe the re-emergence of Realism in painting, associated with the “Twenty-Two Realists” exhibition at the Whitney Museum in January 1970, and artists that used the camera and other mechanical or semi-mechanical means to transfer visual information to the canvas alongside a newly refined technical capacity to give the finished work a photographic appearance.

The laborious techniques adopted by Photorealist artists, such as Chuck Close, Audrey Flack, Ben Schonzeit, and Don Eddy, depended upon two tools: the classical bristle brush and the airbrush. The latter was used for smoothing blended surfaces, but also, as photorealist artist Chuck Close contends, for “reasons that involve [the artists’] philosophical and conceptual approaches to painting” which he identifies as, “impersonality, system, surface” (Close qtd. in

Meisel, *Photorealism* 15).<sup>3</sup> According to art historian Frederick Hartt, airbrush was used by everyone, who created artworks in the “sharp sybaritic realist” vein, a term which was first coined by Spanish surrealist painter Salvador Dali (Hartt 948-49; Dali 4-5).

The re-emergence of the airbrush technique in the 1970s thus secured the popularity of the medium for the 1980s, and the enduring influence of new artistic trends associated with realistic and laborious representations. It was also in the 80s that this style began to be adopted by illustrators or advertisers, who explored its new possibilities and established its intertextual character by appropriating elements from even older styles and aesthetic movements.

### SHAPING THE 1980S AIRBRUSH ART STYLE: INFLUENCES AND THEMES

Exploring the formal characteristics of the 1980s airbrush art, we come across a modern revival of the older styles that were the first to influence airbrush art. In a decade that saw the rise of postmodern aesthetics in Europe and the USA, the 1980s airbrush art is also recognizable as a style that shares specific postmodern attributes (Siegel 2).<sup>4</sup> Airbrush art produces a highly aestheticized, nostalgic art language that is curiously devoid of “genuine historicity”, and, at the same time, uses this method of pastiche in a manner that “subverts dominant discourses” by creatively merging of different artistic styles and popular culture elements in a way that challenges the once characteristic dichotomy between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” culture (Jameson 17-19; Hutcheon 46), such as in the case of American illustrator Patrick Nagel.

In addition to Hyperrealism’s photographic rendering of painted reality, the influence of Art Deco was central and formative for the look of 1980s airbrush art, providing it with many of its most common motifs. Art Deco, as the “last truly sumptuous style, a legitimate and highly fertile chapter in the history of applied art,” evolved its basic iconography from avant-garde painting (Cubism, Futurism, etc.) and a series of vernacular characteristics (such as zigzags, chevrons, flowers, high fashion) during the 1920s in Europe and in the 1930s in the USA, when the splendor of machinery and aerodynamic de-



signs affected its various forms (Duncan 7). After its decline, Art Deco was revived many times later, as “an artistic amalgam” (Duncan 8). According to Nancy McClelland, Art Deco not only proved to be a “useful language” for the Pop Art of the late 1960s, revolving around “the flat colors and hard-edged shapes of the Deco graphics,” but also achieved rebirth in different fashion trends and film in the 1970s (McClelland 251-53; Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* 86).<sup>5</sup> Art Deco’s revival had been one of the decisive factors in shaping the popularity of airbrush art in the 1970s in the USA, and specifically in Los Angeles. American airbrush art was incredibly popular: “It was everywhere—magazines, album covers, high up on billboards; on clothing, as fine art, and in the film”; and its aesthetics were based on the imagery of “metal, plastic and streamline” which were reflected in the modern American city (Salisbury 7 and 10). Influenced by the pre-war nostalgic images created by Push Pin Studios, the LA scene’s airbrush artists, such as Peter Palombi, Charles White III, and Dave Williardson, deployed Art Deco or Tropical Deco motifs in their airbrush art, creating stunning visual examples of imaginary and almost non-temporal still-life compositions and portraits.

The dawn of the 1980s saw yet another revival of the Art Deco style in Europe: the seminal design collective Memphis, based in Milan and led by Ettore Sottsass, was inspired by older Art Deco aesthetics, blending them with popular Milanese culture, the traditions of the Orient, and elements of *Streamline Moderne* (Horn 20). At the same time, the rich European style was assimilated into the American culture, resulting in the birth of Tropical Deco architecture in Miami, Florida, which “evolved out of a softer palette and had a different vision from ‘Big City’ or ‘Industrial Deco’” (Capitman; Cerwinski 11). For Cerwinski, Tropical Deco was “an architecture designed to evoke feelings of delight” and its soft pastels, streamlined aesthetics, glass block windows, curved angles, and geometric compositions were some of the most frequently recurring themes of the 1980s airbrush art (12).

In this regard, the 1980s airbrush art could be seen as a natural extension of its 1970s version. Apart from technical illustration, which stuck to the smallest representational elements, a heavy Deco influ-

ence can be traced in the attention given to the slightest details of the 1980s airbrush art, and is evident in both still-life illustrations and portraits from the era. These still-life compositions revolve around recurring themes, such as food and beverages (colorful and shiny cocktails, sundaes, and so on) (Image 1), deco buildings, palm trees, and vases with flowers. The same attention to detail, however, is evident in airbrush portraiture. Mal Watson, a British airbrush artist, produced a series of female portraits or “ladies,” such as *Oriental Lady*, *Chic Lady*, and *Midnight Lady*, which depicted various *femmes fatales* in different urban landscapes. Echoing Art Deco and Japonisme, those female portraits were clad in high 1930s fashion, drank cocktails, wore sexy heels, and had New York’s Chrysler building or the San Francisco bridge as backgrounds (Image 2). They deploy various decorative Art Deco motifs (i.e., the glamorous female sitters that could be seen in older fashion illustrations), using clear outlines, cool colors, while attention is given to the realistic depiction of a central female figure. Sometimes, in addition to its preoccupation with the “roaring 1920s,” airbrush art would also revolve around representations of the 1930s, in which Art Deco style or *Streamline Moderne* elements were prominent.



Image 1: Long Drinks by Laura Rigo © Arti Grafiche Ricordi – Milano. Postcard.

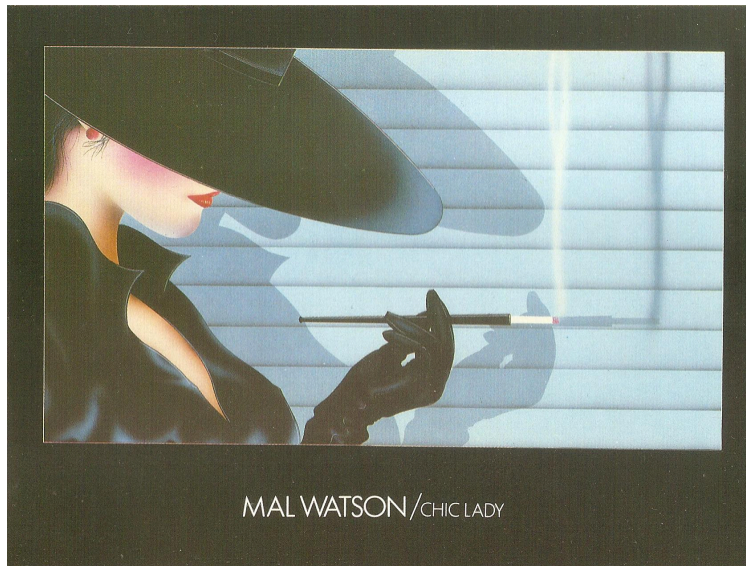


Image 2: *Chic Lady* by Mal Watson © Athena International London. Postcard.

Pierrots were also a recurrent theme. As Duncan observes, fashion illustrators from the 1920s, such as Georges Barbier, Georges Lepape, and André Édouard Marty, “mixed 18th-century pierrots, columbines, powdered girls and crinolines with the depiction of young women” clad in haute couture fashion, and, therefore, were the first to popularize the pierrot motif. Pierrot-inspired portraits from European illustrators, like Luigi Patignani, show the creative accumulation of Art Deco motifs in the 1980s postmodern airbrush art (Image 3). *Sad Pierrot* by Patignani presents the viewer with a tension between clear and blurred lines tracing the outline of the figure’s face and clothing. These lines merge in a tense photo-realistic style that is as vivid as it appears to be empty, devoid of underlying or “hidden” concepts.



Image 3: Pierrot by Luigi Patrignani © Arti Grafiche Ricordi – Milano. Postcard.

It should be noted that retrofuturism also occupied a privileged space in the airbrush art of the 1980s. Guffey and Lemay argue that retrofuturism in the culture of the 20th century identifies the future as a “style,” infused with “nostalgia, irony, and time-bending dislocation” (434). Retrofuturist imagery offers futuristic visions articulated in a retro style, creating a back-and-forth dialogue between the past and the future, as in the exemplary work of Japanese artists Hajime So-

rayama and Pater Sato.<sup>6</sup> *Shooting Wide* by Brak is an exemplary illustration in this vein (Image 4). Featuring cool and warm colors, three identical punkish female sitters with a gun in their hand appear in movement, manifesting their sensuality. The artist faithfully records their facial features (hair, eyes, etc.) and masters the textile form of their clothing in bright sequins and other textures. They appear against a horizontal, non-realistic, and futuristic background made of neon lights. They seem to be shooting towards a prospective era, somewhere in the near future.

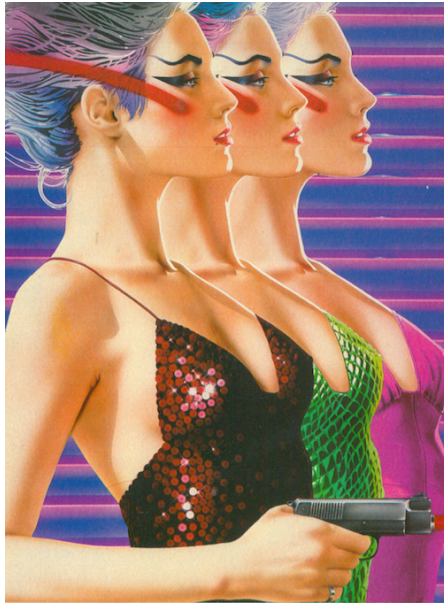


Image 4: *Shooting Wide* by Syd Brak © Athena International London. Postcard.

Nostalgia for other decades, such as the 1950s and the 1960s, can be traced in the airbrush works of artists like Martin Alton, who delved into imagery of 1950s popular stars, diners, jukeboxes, ads, and so on. In the 1980s, Alton produced a series of portraits depicting 1950s film and music stars like Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando, Elvis Presley, and James Dean. These portraits, which focus in on the slightest detail, also include a miniaturized full-body sketch of the



star against a plain background placed at the bottom of the composition. The Presley portrait looks like a faded photograph, employing cool pastel tones, while Elvis's mellow gaze reveals a yearning for older and better days (Image 5).

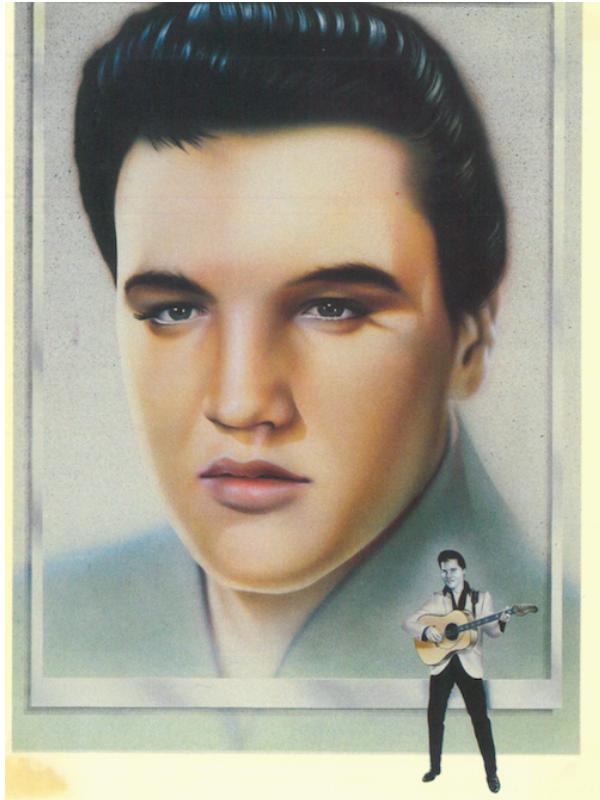


Image 5: Elvis by Martin Alton © Athena International London. Postcard.

A final point should be made about the similarities between airbrush works that results from recurring subjects and themes and copycat productions that try to imitate the success or popularity of other artists. While this repetition and reduplication is troubling from the standpoint of originality and authenticity, it expands the notion of airbrush art's intertextuality that reinforces the meaning of the expe-

rience, rather than undermining the aura of the work's authenticity. In the case of Barry Leppard's *Reflections* (Athena International) and Patrignani's *New York Reflections* (Paperclub, Arti Grafiche Ricordi), the eye area in each portrait constitutes for both illustrations the focal point—covered by either a mirror hat or huge sunglasses—that initiates an interplay between light and shade. The reflected images in each illustration indicate New York as the sitter's most likely location. The main subject of such illustrations is life in the modern metropolis, seen not from different, but complementary, perspectives.



Image 6: *Reflections* by Barry Leppard © Athena International London. Postcard.



Image 7: New York Reflections by Luigi Patignani © Arti Grafiche Ricordi – Milano.  
Postcard.

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## ACHIEVING POPULARITY: AIRBRUSH ART ON POSTCARDS, POSTERS, ALBUM COVERS, AND STATIONARY

**D**espite the fact that the airbrush style shared some high-brow characteristics with Photorealism and that some airbrush artists exhibited their work at art galleries, airbrush art was nonetheless considered a popular medium and mode of artistic expression tied to the circulation of prints, posters, and postcards, featuring still life, portraits, and landscapes. As everyday commodities, these iterations of airbrush art bore the twin characteristics of most popular graphic design artifacts: they were mass reproduced and therefore affordable (Jobling and Crowley 1 and 3).

The American stationary company Paper Moon Graphics became one of the first stationary companies to publish postcards with various artworks by 1970s airbrush artists like Peter Palombi. However, it was graphic designer and illustrator Patrick Nagel, who gave prominence to the poster as an artistic form. As Elena G. Millie observes, “Nagel’s posters have been in the forefront of the contemporary trend to move advertising art away from the product to other images; they also have an independent existence ... tending to obliterate the line between the fine and applied arts” (6-9). Nagel’s line was imaginatively adopted by stationery companies, such as Arti Grafiche Ricordi from Milano in Italy, Verkerke from the Netherlands, and Athena International from the United Kingdom.<sup>7</sup> The latter two released a series of printed posters and postcards of airbrush art, which decorated hundreds of teenage bedrooms as well as various shops, cafeterias, and clubs in the 1980s.

Some of these prints and posters operated as a synecdoche for airbrush art per se. The South-African illustrator Brak, for example, admired the pin-ups by Alberto Vargas and the Palm Beach style and blended popular culture, iconic fashion elements, and nostalgia in many of his famous airbrush illustrations.<sup>8</sup> When Brak arrived in London, Punk was a dominant aesthetic trend, but, according to the illustrator, “it lacked style,” as it was “slightly dirty and unfinished” (Email communication). So, he re-imagined and re-designed the Punk look in “a fashionable Milanese way” (Email communica-

tion).<sup>9</sup> Seen in this light, the story behind the release of *Long Distance Kiss* in print—one of the most iconic Athena posters created by Brak—was, in fact, a narrative of what was happening in the popular culture of the era (Image 8). As Brak recalls:

A company called Athena produced and sold art prints derived from famous artists like Monet, Degas etc. This was a limited market and they were in financial difficulties. They approached me to produce a series of posters, which would appeal to a wider market. I suspected that any expansion would come from a younger market so this took my interest back to the punk look. The task I set myself was to produce aspirational images for teenagers. I conceived emotional messages but using a punk approach to identify with the teenager. As I said I found the Punk look slightly dirty and unfinished. I, therefore, imagined the Punk look applied in a fashionable Milanese way. The result was the “Kiss” series of which “The Long Distance Kiss” became the world’s bestselling poster for two years running and revived the fortunes of Athena. The success of this look led to The New Romantics era. (Email communication)<sup>10</sup>



Image 8: Long Distance Kiss © Syd Brak, 1982. Poster.

*Long Distance Kiss* took everyone by surprise, as it actually represented a departure from the classic airbrush style and an initiation into the stunning world of fashion, music, and youth. It features an

interchange of harder and softer lines, bright and shiny reds in the photorealistic vein. It exemplifies Brak's choice of depicting heads in profile, while attention is drawn to the melting telephone, a medium of communication and, apparently, a love confession. Brak's female portraits may resemble the high fashion queens of the 1920s in terms of grace and style, but they also appeared as an extraordinary example of the successful integration of older and newer visual codes. It should be stressed that fashion illustration was also enjoying its heyday at this time, with artists like Antonio Lopez and Nagel, whose art was published in *Playboy* magazine, allegedly defining the female portrait of the decade (see Caranicas).<sup>11</sup> Brak's airbrush works, including the well-known *Long Distance Kiss* and *Lost Love*, are designed with the same technique: hyper-exposed faces emerge from the illustration's background and are confined to some basic facial features. The bright reds on the lips or cheeks of the sitters of Brak's designs provide a youthful tone, while their eyes stand in for the total absence of hair, ears, neck, and body. In the meantime, no time and space are suggested, forms float in an imaginary "time space," which can partially be indicated thanks to the vibrant fashion details that echo the trends and the subcultures of the decade.

Within a constant intertextual play, the airbrush art of the 1980s was not only informed by older styles, but also kept in view what was actually happening in popular and youth culture through the negotiation of its various meanings and their visualization (Barnard 83-85). Being inspired by the subcultures and fashion trends of the 1980s, the *Kiss* became a synecdoche for the dreamy and colorful airbrush style that followed its release, as well as the type of the female figure it featured, following the tradition of the 1980s grand female portraits created by other graphic designers and illustrators like Nagel.

Brak's influence on the contemporary airbrush art of the 1980s could be traced in the work of different airbrush artists. His female prototype, as represented in *Long Distance Kiss*, was widely reproduced in Verkerke's stationery imagery, while his airbrush works were also released by the Dutch publishing company, which focused its attention also on airbrush art through different artists, such as the German partners Gilda Belin and Fred-Jürgen Rogner. The pastel palette of their Palm Beach landscapes and interiors and their female min-

imal portraits with bold pink blush have been on magazine covers, as well as postcards, posters, and teenager's bags. During that time, Verkerke also produced stationery products and bags, which featured the work of Belin-Rogner and Alton's homage to airbrush portraits of 1950s film and music stars, which had previously been featured on Athena postcards. The illustrator "Gerry the Cat" also conceived airbrush works in the manner of Brak, which were released as stickers, or were featured on notebooks and various accessories.

The airbrush art of the 1980s played a vital role in the various fields of visual communication, including advertising, illustration, and graphic design both in the USA and Europe. Even in the era when popular music was mainly promoted by MTV, the first television channel ever to broadcast music video-clips, the album art of the vinyl record jackets still contributed to the sales of an LP. Record covers became cultural "artefacts," offering consumers "an attractive site and sight, where the look of authenticity is actually more crucial to the collector than the effective authenticity of the object" (Roy 126). As Steve Jones and Martin Sorgen observe, "genres of popular music are not entirely musical but also visual, and ... music listeners typically bring with them a good knowledge of visual styles" (84). These visual styles are often associated with other merchandising (t-shirts, bags, posters, and so on) featuring graphic design(s) replicated across a number of products.

Many popular record sleeves of the 1980s were designed by airbrush artists, some of whom tried to reproduce the Brak prototype and featured characteristic female airbrush figures.<sup>12</sup> One such example stems from Canada: Lime, the HI-NRJ duet and husband-and-wife project, had their record sleeves designed by Graffiti Studio of Montreal in the characteristic airbrush style, beginning with their *Lime II* (1982) and continuing with *Lime III* (1983). Their record sleeves for *Sensual Sensation* LP (1984) and onwards feature artwork that is reminiscent of Brak's airbrush portraits: bathed in the band's trademark color (lime), a female figure is positioned opposite a cold cocktail, one of the recurring themes of 1980s airbrush art (Image 9). Employing clear outlines with marvelous radiations and hues in green, this jacket illustration produces a simultaneously tropical and postmodern sensation.<sup>13</sup>

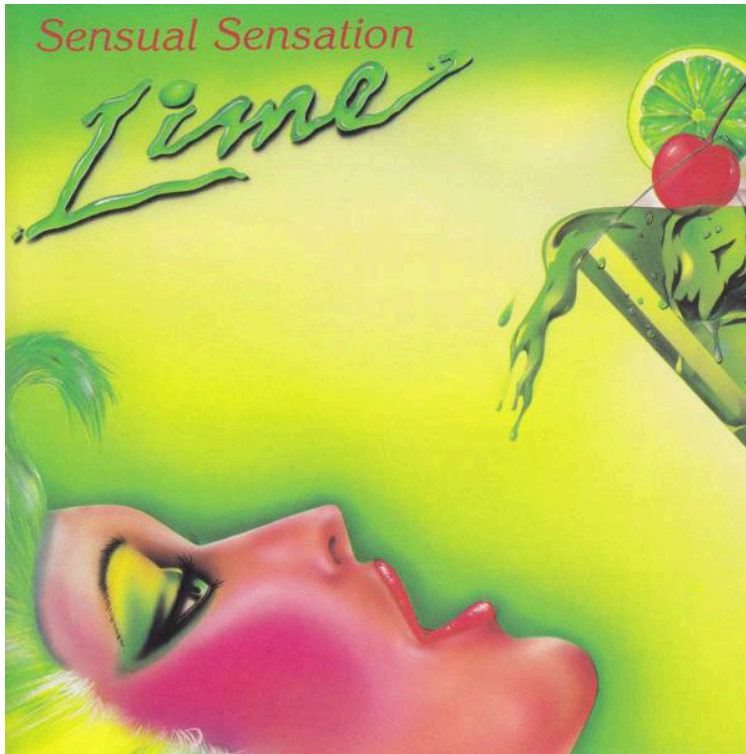


Image 9: Record Sleeve for Lime's *Sensual Sensation* LP, 1984 © Graffiti Studio of Montreal.

### A LONG DECLINE, A FRESH REVIVAL

I now want to theorize the reemergence of the 1980s airbrush art in the present, using Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope" (from "chronos" for time and "topos" for space). As Bakhtin notes, the term was first employed in the context of Einstein's Theory of Relativity; his "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," however, seeks to redeploy it as a conceptualization of the merging of space and time "artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 84). It is in the "chronotope," Bakhtin says, that time "thickens" and becomes "artistically visible" (Bakhtin 84). Here, space responds to "move-

ments of time, plot and history” and, in so doing, becomes, charged with historicity (Bakhtin 84). In this sense, time interweaves with space (and vice versa) and allows us to understand the way history is represented by a text and the way images of both elements are articulated and related to one another.

As “no artifact of culture [including airbrush art] ever exists outside of particular moments in historical time and space” (Haynes 104), the notion of chronotope could be useful as a “metaphor of society and one of the principal generators of artistic meanings in both literature and painting” (Best 291). In this light, airbrush art could be interpreted as a “chronotope” of the 1980s’ popular culture and art emerged through the decade of the Wall Street Boom, the New Conservatism of the US President Ronald Reagan, and conspicuous consumption (see Phillips-Fein; Batchelor and Stoddard 3; and Thompson 15) of hard goods, fashion, etc. Filtered through a nostalgic, Art-Deco lens and producing images of retrofuturity punctuated by tropical intervals, the airbrush chronotope, implicitly or explicitly, could be also a reference to the 1980s metropolis “high life” and consumer luxuries, as well as lavish glamor.

Throughout the 1990s, the airbrush art that had previously flourished in advertising, the posters and postcards of Athena and Verkerke publishing companies, and on vinyl jackets started to show signs of formal decline: the repetition of styles and themes and the recycling of ideas, which resulted in the emergence of schlock aesthetics and soulless copies of older successful artworks. In this regard, the 1980s airbrush art was instantly associated with the notion of kitsch and outdatedness, as the new developments in the 1990s graphic design, especially due to the emergence of the digital technology, posed the outlines of a fundamental change in the poster itself (Guffey, *Posters: A Global History* 231). Against that background, digital design tended to concentrate attention on new forms of communication, discourse, and aesthetics, while raising questions about craftiness, form and content.

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century and at the beginning of the following, the 1980s airbrush art resurfaced thanks to the Internet: Athena or Verkerke posters with airbrush illustration are now,

for example, regularly sold in virtual marketplaces, such as eBay or Etsy. The rise of micro-blogging sites (like Tumblr) and image/photo-sharing applications designed to create visual collections (like Pinterest) allowed users to upload scanned images of rare airbrush-illustration books, paper cuts, and postcards. As a result, users began creating and curating image collections under headings like “airbrush,” “80s art,” “hyperrealism,” or “syd brak,” making airbrush art widely available on the World Wide Web. Using these platforms, users tried to organize their memories and to identify and share their nostalgia for the themes of the 1980s airbrush art and the memories they associated with them.

Such activities bear a specific significance, that of creating a state of *off modernity*. Overcoming the tradition of the “postmodern condition” and its discontents—the death of the subject and what Jean-François Lyotard identified as “incredulity towards metanarratives”—the *off-modern* is instead concerned with worship of these same ruins (on the “postmodern condition,” see Lyotard xxiv). As Boym argues, *off-modernity* is revealed “in the form of a paradoxical ruinophilia,” allowing us to “frame utopian projects as dialectical ruins,” which are then to be incorporated back into the here and now (36). How could these scanned airbrush artworks be simply regarded as pure “ruin” or nostalgia? This would be a rather naive approach. Clearly they bear the trace of utopian longing as well.

Without any doubt, the manifold character of the 1980s airbrush art with its own representations, rhetoric, and its constant intertextual interplay evokes complex feelings of nostalgia that represent “the past with a sadness that is blended with a small measure of pleasure”—a yearning, in other words, for the past decades (the 1930s, the 1950s) and the era during which airbrush flourished the most (the 1980s) (Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* 19). However, this type of utopian nostalgia emerged not only due to the interactivity between the users and the Internet through the aforementioned platforms. One crucial factor should also be located in the financial crisis of 2007-2008 in the USA and in Europe, whose devastating effects led to the reinvention of new survival tactics and the rise of vintage markets (Cassidy and Bennett). As Elena Oliete-Aldea argues,



With the financial crash that burst the period of economic abundance, replacing the optimistic belief of a linear progression of history for the better by the idea of history as decline, leading to fragmented societies and identities, with individuals lacking autonomy and spontaneous expressivity. With not only an uncertain future, but an unstable present, 21st century societies affected by the economic crisis tend to look back nostalgically to the past. (351)

Within this framework, the 1980s airbrush art offers a clear vision of a luxurious “escapist” world, where airbrush craftsmanship undermines the alienation of postmodern digital amenities. Airbrush illustrations, like other popular art forms, thus bear a kind of utopian sensibility: whatever the crisis one is experiencing in the outside world, one’s bedroom, adorned again with his posters, could become a safe harbor for the dreams the young and old alike.<sup>14</sup> These airbrush female portraits or landscapes call one like a Siren to escape into the near future or the long-forgotten past with an explosion of pigments.

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#### NOTES

1. Tumblr accounts, such as "palm and laser" (<http://palmandlaser.tumblr.com>), upload scanned images from 1980s books on interior design and illustration like *Restaurant Design* (1987), and *Bathroom Design* (1985).↵
2. The term "Photorealism" describes this wide corpus of works, but, according to Meisel, does not constitute a "movement" (Meisel, *Photorealism* 20). Works included in this canon must have been exhibited by 1972.↵
3. "Impersonality" refers to the nature of the photographic material used to create a painting; "system" relates to the series of techniques used to render a photorealist artwork; and "surface" is associated with the thin surface of photorealist paintings due to the frequent use of the airbrush (see Meisel, *Photorealism Since 1980* 8-10).↵
4. As Bonnie Clearwater argues, the year 1979 could be considered as "watershed," as it coincided with the return of painting, which was considered dead in the USA in the late 1960s, and opened a critical dialogue about the definition of postmodernism at the beginning of the next decade (Clearwater 7). During this time, New York still operated as the "arbiter of contemporary art history" and centered on neo-expression-

ism, post-structuralism and Neo-Geo, or, the New Geometry (Clearwater 7). This mainly “European, and predominantly painterly, upsurge” was evident in various exhibitions around the world (Nairne 17).<sup>4</sup>

5. Barbara Hulanicki’s “Biba” was an English fashion store, which was based in London during the 1960s until the mid-seventies. It mixed some major Art Deco and Art Nouveau influences on clothing, accessories, and 1930s-inspired objects. Films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) invoked the popular culture of the 1930s, including mass entertainment (i.e., radio shows) and fashion trends. In the 1970s, *The Boyfriend* (Ken Russell, 1971) and *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, 1972) further explored the Deco iconography and paid dues to its distinctive imagery. The 1980s Deco revival can also be traced in films such as *Liquid Sky* (Slava Tsukerman, 1982) and *Un Sapore di Paura (Pathos)* (Piccio Raffanini, 1987).<sup>5</sup>
6. After working as an illustrator in advertising and independently, and after his previous interest in pin-ups or erotic art, Japanese artist Hajime Sorayama drew the first of his “Robot” series in 1978; his Sexy Robots were published in 1983. Defining himself as a “super-realist” illustrator, he also created retro-futuristic imagery with female and male robots—even their “robot” pets—in erotic poses, set in an unidentified future. Sorayama’s robots go beyond the marvels of the 1980s technology; they represent “the true icons of the millennium that is now drawing to a close, produced by the mating of the insatiable consumer-world with the cyberworld that is overtaking us” (*Airbrush in Japan I* 4). In fact, they become a cynical comment on the overwhelming power of consumerism and technology and their effects on everyday humans, as represented in his MASKS series. It is also within this context, and with a multiplicity of interests in airbrush art (fashion illustration, and erotic art for *Playboy*), Japanese airbrush artist Pater Sato evolved a unique style, which combined the brilliant femininity of Syd Brak’s portraits with futuristic details.<sup>6</sup>
7. Arti Grafiche Ricordi published airbrush posters and postcards from Italian airbrush artists and illustrators, such as Luigi Patignani, Laura Rigo, and M. Santambrogio. They recycled the same airbrush themes and represented a series of romantic female portraits and pierrots as well as abstract compositions with Coca-Cola tins, red hearts, and ice creams.

The company was popular in Europe, and, particularly, in Greece where its posters could be seen hanging in record shops, cafeterias and bars, as documented in the short-lived Greek direct-to-video film production (1985-1990), which was associated with kitsch aesthetics and employed often airbrush posters as a settings decor and in Greek television shows or series (such as *To Retire / The Penthouse* (1990-1992, MEGA Channel or *O Kanonieris ke I Vendetta / The Striker and the Starlet* (1991, ANT1).<sup>11</sup>

8. Other airbrush works by Brak further develop his visual “jargon.” He deploys and displays elements of the Tropical Deco vocabulary in his airbrush work *California Dreams*, which features three girls in jeans riding their bicycles through a tropical landscape with tall palm trees. In addition to his use of bright colors, Brak also worked with darker hues, as, for example, in his 1984 piece, which features a woman in black clothing and a helmet etched with “Ministry of Love” (in homage to George Orwell’s dystopian novel 1984).<sup>12</sup>
9. According to Simona Reinach, it was in the late 1960s that Milano became the new driving force behind Italian fashion with designers, such as Elio Fiorucci. In the beginning of the 1970s, the city had already emerged as the international capital of fashion, where fashion designers, artists and photographers “contributed to consolidating the relationship between the intellectual world, the art world, and fashion” (242).<sup>13</sup>
10. See also Webb (8-9). The New Romantics stemmed out of the so-called The Blitz Kids, post-punk habitués of The Blitz Club in London, where they used to socialize and compete in eccentric clothing. Their style ranged from medieval to postmodern mix-and-match aesthetics with a corresponding make-up style—especially the blusher on their cheekbones, taken straight out of *Long Distance Kiss*.<sup>14</sup>
11. Brak’s portraits appear to be something more than the respective versions of Nagel and Lopez. His portraits are minimalistic, usually set on a monochromatic—usually white—background. His pictorial device is clearly the airbrush, which allows him to use colors just like he were using transparent, but brilliant and bold, water colors. Female sitters are clad in sparkling paillettes, faces are sharp with tiny decorative elements, which shine like metal. In the same vein, Brak’s work *Wired for Sound* appears to use more visual information, dense and colorful, as if his pre-

vious models finally emerge from light. With a total control of the mastering of the sitter's heads, he uses basic colors again, such as red and blue, and intersects romanticism with technology, music and reverie, using two almost twin models with punkish hair, daydreaming in sound.┐

12. The "pioneers" of the L.A. West Coast airbrush style, such as Peter Palombi or Charles White III, also engaged with record sleeve design, infusing it with their particular aesthetics. Palombi had designed sleeves for Eddie Harris's *Is It In* (Atlantic, 1974) and Michel Polnareff's self-titled LP (Atlantic, 1975). Charles White III did design for Sammy Davis's *When The Feeling Hits You* (Reprise Records, 1965) and The Trammps' famous *Disco Inferno* (Atlantic, 1976). Three decades later, Brak's *Long Distance Kiss* and *Wired to Sound* were featured on Jupiter Black (ft. Fred Ventura), *Hold Me* (2007) and Alba (ft. Fred Ventura), *Without You* (2011).┐
13. Lime's other LPs, such as *A Brand New Day* (1988) and *Caroline* (1991), feature more photorealistic female torsos, using trademark lime-colored details associated with the band. Over the years, the Brak prototype has been transformed, especially when it was visually recreated for Italo Disco jacket illustrations. Although made with airbrush, they poorly replicate the older archetypes in an attempt to recreate their exotic or retro-futuristic aura that characterized the cover of *Tropical Classics... at its Best!* (Unidisc, 1989), which features a dense cover with a Brak female on an orange background. However, the most characteristic example of the mistreatment of Brak's aesthetics was the record sleeve of Italo Disco act LaLa. Their 12" single *Johnny Johnny* (Academy, 1986) is based on Brak's *Electric Kiss*. The illustrator, however, seems to have erased the basic details, but the main form, a female giving a passionate kiss, still remains and has been re-masked by other media.┐
14. I use the term, utopian, in the manner proposed by Richard Dyer and applied to forms of popular entertainment: "Two of the taken-for-granted descriptions of entertainment, as 'escape' and as 'wish-fulfilment,' point to its central thrust, namely, utopianism. Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes—these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized" (Dyer 20).┐