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Bit by Bit, the Digital Age Comes Into Artistic Focus



LANCE KINZ bends over a small pile of electronic equipment, punches a few buttons and stands back as a long, rectangular television monitor on the wall fills with color. Mr. Kinz, director of the Feigen Contemporary gallery in Manhattan, is showing a visitor work by one of his artists, Jeremy Blake. As Mr. Blake's pieces swirl into focus, the screen comes alive with light and movement ? opalescent panels pulse, geometric grids surround patches of color and then dissolve behind tonal veils.

From time to time, the mists resolve into representational images, usually bits of architecture. A "wall" appears and then gives way as portals glide open, Star Trek-style, to reveal hidden spaces behind it ? a slot filled with lapping orange shapes like flames in some virtual après-ski fireplace; a deep black ground twinkling with dots of light, suggesting a snowy winter night.

Minutes pass as the shapes and colors shift and dissolve to a soundtrack of whispers and swellings in sync with the visual rhythms, until finally the cool, hypnotic work comes full circle and starts again.

"I think of them as a cross between a painting and a lava lamp," Mr. Kinz says as he brings the lights back up. Though the two concepts might seem incompatible, the description turns out to be evocative: not only of Mr. Blake's work but also of the often incongruous nature of art in a digital age. Advances in computing power, production processes and material science have given today's artists new ways of working and new tools to work with.

They have in turn set off an aesthetic free- for-all characterized by increasingly sophisticated hybrid projects involving disparate mediums and genres. Instead of paintings, sculptures or drawings, viewers might get virtual environments, automated sculpture- making machines, mutable photographic imagery or complex musical compositions built on computer noise.

Like Mr. Blake, who trained as a painter but now employs techniques more closely allied with filmmaking, photography, installation or digital design, the artists pioneering these new combinatory forms are producing work that thwarts conventional categorization. They're also stirring dramatic changes in artistic practice.

No longer deployed simply for their bells and whistles, hi-tech modes of artistic production are rapidly becoming commonplace. They are also being integrated, ever more regularly and subtly, with existing practices. For the next few months, a pair of major museum exhibitions ? "010101: Art in Technological Times" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (through July 8) and "BitStreams" at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (opening on Thursday and running through June 10) ? will examine the growing convergence between art and technology.

"There are countless artists who are engaging digital technologies to make their work," says Lawrence Rinder, curator of contemporary art at the Whitney and the lead curator for "BitStreams," "sometimes in places where you least expect it and absolutely across media ? in painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, video."

The increasing use of technological materials and methods is more than simply a formal or stylistic phenomenon, Mr. Rinder says. Artists are also creating resonant new reflections of modern life. "But it goes beyond that," he says. "I do think there are ways in which some of the metaphors that are being opened to us by the use of digital technology are useful for thinking about things like consciousness and being, things that have always been with us."

Mr. Rinder developed "BitStreams" with the Whitney's associate curator for contemporary art, Debra Singer (who programmed the show's sound-related works), and its adjunct curator for new media arts, Christiane Paul, who is coordinating a contemporaneous exhibition for the Whitney of Internet art projects called "Data Dynamics." Meanwhile, in San Francisco, a similarly diverse curatorial team worked on "010101": Aaron Betsky, Janet Bishop, Kathleen Forde, Adrienne Gagnon, John Weber and Benjamin Weil represented every department in the museum, from architecture and design to painting, sculpture, media arts and education.

Despite the timing, staff members at the museums insist that neither team has given much thought to the other's exhibition. And in any event, there is little overlap: out of nearly 100 artists between the two shows, only a handful, including Mr. Blake, are in both. If this suggests the independent institutional visions at work, it also confirms the growing pool of technology-related material available to choose from. Both exhibitions have the loose-limbed feel of shows in which almost everyone is an emerging artist, working with technologies and forms that are themselves still emergent.

"Technology is not the subject of '010101,' but rather the ubiquity of technology," says David A. Ross, the director of San Francisco Modern (and a former director of the Whitney). "The curators wanted to look at how that's reflected both in artists who are using digital tools or online systems and structures, and those who are using more traditional artmaking techniques."

Mr. Ross, who as a young curator worked with video when the medium was still in its infancy, sees both parallels and distinctions between that time and today. "We recognized in the early 1970's that changes in technology were going to have an enormous impact on social relations," he says. "But one of the things that was very different was the rate at which this new paradigm was absorbed, welcomed and reflected in all the structures of social life. The world of commerce was completely ready ? as, needless to say, was the world of finance ? to welcome this revolution."

Trying to sort out the meaning of a revolution before the smoke has cleared is tricky. But despite the distinct concepts informing these two shows, they do often find common ground as they survey the new digital landscape. Both have Internet components, each featuring five commissioned projects. The "010101" online exhibition (www.sfmoma.org) opened on Jan. 1, 2001, presenting projects like Mark Napier's "Feed," an engaging program that reprocesses the colors of visited Web pages and then builds vivid displays based on the information.

At the Whitney Museum, "Data Dynamics" projects will be available both online (www.whitney.org) and in physical installation. Among the commissioned works is Adrienne Wortzel's "Camouflage Town," a project starring an interactive remote-control robot that will take up residence on the museum's fourth floor for the run of the show. Navigable from either a work station in the museum or through the Web site, the automaton will transmit live online audio and video feeds of its travels and interactions.

Similarly, both institutions are making sound-related art a priority. At the Whitney, Ms. Singer has brought together an eclectic group of two dozen audio artists in a customized listening environment designed by the architectural firm LOT/EK. For its part, the San Francisco show, though it includes a number of artists who incorporate sound in their work,

doesn't devote a special section to audio projects per se; but as if to make up for that lack, the museum recently announced CrossFade, an Internet-based performance and distribution space for sound art, coordinated by the museum and an international consortium of cultural organizations.

Finally, each show also offers new technology-related works in its physical space. In San Francisco, commissioned pieces include a site-specific assemblage by Sarah Sze, known for her sprawling improvisational installations using mass-produced consumer items, and a "video walk" project by the Canadian artist Janet Cardiff, whose participatory audio-visual tours destabilize the boundaries between the real world and the fictional one she proposes.

Meanwhile, the Whitney is offering several debuts as well, including the "Rhapsody Spray" series by the New York artist Carl Fudge, whose elegant screenprints of computer-modified pop-culture imagery illustrate the complex exchanges occurring between traditional and contemporary production methods. "BitStreams" also marks the premiere of Mr. Blake's newest piece, "Station to Station."

Trained as a painter at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Cal Arts in Los Angeles, Mr. Blake, 29, hardly qualifies as a techno-whiz. In fact, he had little contact with digital processes until he moved to New York in the mid-1990's. "When I got here, I got a job working for a photo retoucher, which is technical but also traditionally a hand-done process," he recalls. "You could bring in an image on a negative, scan it, retouch it and print it out as a new or altered image.

"I had started to move toward a more pop sensibility with my own paintings by that point," says Mr. Blake, noting his admiration for the work of artists like Ed Ruscha and James Rosenquist. "I was also interested in the crossover between photography and painting and was trying to achieve this sort of photo surface for my paintings anyway. So I thought, 'Why not make my own images that way?'"

Eventually, Mr. Blake parlayed his new-found technical experience into a job as an illustrator for children's CD-ROM's and he began to experiment in his free time with digitally produced imagery of his own. A series of photographic prints followed, typically featuring stylized architectural spaces redolent of California modernism and obliquely suggestive of a kind of noirish Hollywood decadence.

Drawing on his experience making pictures move in his day job, Mr. Blake also began to consider ways of elaborating on the prints. The result was the first set of "time-based paintings," as the artist came to call them? "Bungalow 8," a trio of three-minute works made with paint and photographic programs that evoke a famous cabana at the Beverly Hills Hotel, home to legendary lavish parties.

Now, just two years later, the San Francisco Modern is showing a pair of Mr. Blake's recent animated works, while the Whitney is set to unveil his most complex project to date: an integrated, five-screen piece evoking travel in an underground rail system, based on visual motifs Mr. Blake recently encountered in a Tokyo subway.

A few weeks before "BitStreams" and "010101" were to open, much of the international contemporary-art world gathered in New York for a trade fair, the 2001 Armory Show. Late one afternoon, a small traffic jam had formed as several people slowed down to watch one of Mr. Blake's "digital paintings" do its thing. From somewhere in the crowd, a puzzled voice could be heard asking, "Is the work moving or is it us?"

In fact, it's both: art and viewers together, caught in the perpetual motion of the digital present, traveling toward unimaginable, and unimaginably rich, interdependent futures.

Jeffrey Kastner has recently written about the artists Sol LeWitt and Tom Friedman in Arts & Leisure.