

ARTS

Art in the here and now

Artists' technical touches get viewers involved



Camille Utterback's works invite others to move their bodies and influence the look of her constantly regenerating paintings, part of the "Act/React" show at the Milwaukee Art Museum. The Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design and the Haggerty Museum of Art also have new media shows on display. Credit: Peter Harris

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On election night, I looked down at my iPhone as succinct bursts of text from around the world spilled onto the screen in my hand, confirming Barack Obama's win.

The Twitter "feed" came from hundreds of people - Democrats and Republicans, intimates and interesting strangers.

In that moment, it was much richer than anything Wolf Blitzer and CNN could offer, even with their fancy-pants hologram and interactive map.

That night, something about "new media" fully downloaded in my mind: Open and connected media is a demonstrable fact.

In the art world, "new media" can be almost anything that's not paint and has an ounce of technology. One of its greatest roles historically has been to take aim at the conventions of everyday media.

To do that in a moment of rapid innovation is a tall order. With increasingly artful, relevant experiences available through our personal screens, be they laptop, TV or mobile phone, art in a gallery has got to make a case for itself.

But shows of new media art at the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design and the Haggerty Museum of Art - at the same time, coincidentally - successfully tackle the here and now. And with art that wasn't necessarily made in the last five minutes.

Getting Involved

At the "Act/React" show at the Milwaukee Art Museum we witness firsthand how readily people probe technology they don't understand.

Approach the grid of crisp, moving silhouettes in Scott Snibble's "Deep Walls" and the artwork will record your shape and movements and embed them within its rhythms and patterns. You are captured, played and replayed. You leave a trace, like it or not.

And, it turns out, lots of people do like it and offer up their best iPod commercial-like moves. Many try to decipher the piece and control its choreographed rotation, sometimes just to cycle other people out.

That sense of play and manipulation is perhaps at its most beautiful in the primordial goo of Brian Knep's "Healing Pool," a 20-by-30-foot floor piece.

Glowing orange streams are open in our wakes as we stride across the artwork. Behind us, yellow and orange forms ooze back over our paths like lava. Even with its radioactive hues, I found the piece strangely meditative, like a digital prayer labyrinth.

Though I thought years ago that digital art suffered from displays of technological prowess, I find myself surprisingly drawn to the power and beauty of code in artworks such as Knep's and Camille Utterback's constantly regenerating digital paintings.

And there is something comforting and familiar about how all of this works, encountering a new tool or platform, intuitively playing with it and eventually commandeering it.

But there's a disquieting difference - it's physical.

These artworks "see" me in physical space and demand that I step forward and move my body. I lose the comfort of disembodiment, of connecting through Web browsers, images and text, with the separation of space and time. I confess, I kind of like the remove.

And I've got some questions. If The Travelers insurance company can create an interactive ad that responds to movement, turning the iconic red umbrella into a scatter of mini umbrellas as people pass, can interactive art cloistered in a gallery compare to what we find in public space, where serendipity is part of the experience?

Or, how about this: If anyone can go to The New York Times Visualization Lab (vizlab.nytimes.com) and collaborate with people from around the planet on all sorts of visual representations, does interactive art in a museum seem more or less relevant?

The artworks in "Act/React," are wonderfully seductive but (with the notable exception of Janet Cardiff's "The Touch," from 1993) ultimately lacking in content. Unto themselves, they aren't particularly profound.

But what's smart about "Act/React," curated by George Fifiield, founder of the Boston Cyberarts Festival, is the show's collective ability to show us - sensually - what it means to be physically present.

Content Approved

The "Media Projects 2008" and "stop.look.listen" shows at the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design and the Haggerty Museum of Art, respectively, are almost entirely

about content.

Nearly all of the works in these shows, in one form or another, question the ways in which we decide what's true.

One standout is "My Ambience," a two-channel video by Norwegian artist Bodil Furu, part of the MIAD show.

In it, two women from Oslo talk about belief. Fatma, a modern Muslim, talks about how she's become more religious, while Claudia talks about science and technology with science fiction writer Jon Bing.

It's the clumsiness, the awkward pauses and the tangents that Furu holds onto that give the half-hour video its authenticity. Furu values the organic, untidy nature of human nature. For her, it's part of the content.

The result is something searching, at ease with ambiguity, rooted in firsthand experience - and true. The half-hour with this pair of women and the science fiction writer yielded more for me about the zeitgeist than almost anything I've looked at lately.

As part of the MIAD show, Arkansas artist Bethany Springer also gathers everyday stories in an open-ended way. She tries to capture the sense of territory and regional identity that's disappearing from what she calls the "southern Midwest" as a result of globalism and new media.

She asked residents of an assisted living facility in Memphis where they'd go if they could fly. The recorded interview with James Mitchell, 84, is paired with Google Earth images that hover over the city and zoom in on the landmarks he references.

Combined with a tool that makes the world seem so accessible to many of us, and in the context of the election of the first African-American president (and a Web-savvy one at that), Mitchell's sentiments carry a particular poignancy.

"We were better then," says Mitchell, a black man, referring to the past. "I had money, nice clothes . . . now we can't eat . . . Memphis isn't about nothing now . . . I'm scared to go out the door."

Adam Frelin's videos, also at MIAD, curated by artist and professor Jason Yi, are snippets that run in loops. Not unlike a series of videos on YouTube or a conversation thread on Facebook, Frelin drops you into the middle of something without a beginning or end.

With an over-the-river-and-through-the-woods storybook feel, Frelin's works are filled with pilgrimages and a sense of place.

In "Winning Men," we follow a boy on his bike through a seemingly forgotten rural landscape littered with dilapidated cars, abandoned homes, overgrown fields and gravel roads. His solitary treks are part of a quintessential coming-of-age project: collecting posters for the bedroom wall.

Finally assembled, the lad lies back on his bed, looking with satisfaction up at his heroes, from Albert Einstein to Jimi Hendrix, from Jesus to the guy from "The Office," Rainn Wilson. And it's that equal footing between, say, Patrick Dempsey and George Washington that's disconcerting.

The flattening-out effect of media, perhaps?

Croatian Connection

The Haggerty show is essentially a survey of contemporary video art, much of which peels back cultural references that are part of most media experiences.

Perhaps the best example is Johanna Billing's "Magical World." In it, a group of children in an after-school program rehearses a song written in the culturally significant year of 1968 by African-American Sidney Barnes.

We pick up on the fact that these children are earnestly struggling with a language that is not their own. The urban setting, pocked with damaged buildings and unfamiliar to most of us, is historically significant to the people of Zagreb, Croatia, who lived through the Balkan conflict in the 1990s.

Filled with the tension of children on the spot, the scene is, in a way, a portrait of a country trying to re-emerge on the world stage.

"I'm not asking you to understand me," the children sing, giving voice to the disconnect.

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