

You. Are. The. Art.

Museum visitors create the exhibit in ‘ Act/React’

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The brush strokes of a Monet painting? The colors of a van Gogh? Who gets that, right? BOR-ing. Yeah, I'd rather be home playing "de Blob" on my Wii.

But wait. The Milwaukee Art Museum has a nifty, cool exhibit where the art actually reacts to YOU! I know, right? Like, you can actually touch the art, and walk on it. And some of it moves with your shadow.

Get this — the exhibit is called "Act/React: Interactive Installation Art" and it's at the Milwaukee Art Museum until Jan. 11.

It's the first of its kind.

"This show is a timely show because of the mass media we have right now," said John McKinnon, a curatorial assistant at the museum. "Obviously media is definitely changing the world and helping add to it. Video gaming is a million dollar enterprise and it's definitely changing with the Wii system."

Obviously.

"Act/React" has 10 so-called "environments" created by six different pioneers of responsive art, including a piece by the special effects designer who won an Academy Award for "Jurassic Park."

While "Act/React" is a technological marvel, the art collection takes its color palette from its visitors rather than a desktop of keyboards or touchscreens. The art is motion-driven and begs anyone who steps in front of it — or on it — to invoke their creativity.

"People activate the art," said Brigid Globensky, the museum's senior director of education. "That's what it's about. There are some very cool artworks created by visitors. It's just made for families and for kids to crawl and wiggle and really intuitively explore all of these different artworks in their own act of creativity."

Creative boundaries

The experience begins with Scott Snibbe's addictive "Boundary Functions," a retro-reflective square that appears almost like a dance floor. Step on it, and nothing happens. But invite another person to join you, and the floor comes alive.

Lines are projected between you and anyone else who sets a foot on the floor, creating equal regions around each person's feet. As you move, so do the lines of your region. You can try cutting through the floor to invade other people's spaces, but your allotment never changes. Spaces can be combined only when you reach across your space to join hands with a partner.

Projected on a wall next to Snibbe's "Boundary Functions" is his 2003 creation "Deep Walls," a grid of 16 boxes that records a silhouette of anyone moving in front of it. The work is an ever-changing imprint of the last 16 people to interact with it.

"Act/React" only gets better as you progress deeper into the exhibit spaces.

Liz Phillips' "Echo Evolution" takes its cues from the sounds your body makes to create an enchanted neon musical garden. Later, visitors see Camille Utterback's painting background in a trio of pieces that put brush strokes and splotches of color onto a screen based on people's movements.

The centerpiece of the exhibit is Academy Award winner Brian Knap's "Healing Pool," a floor about half the size of a basketball court with colorful forms that reconfigure in the wake of anyone who passes over it. With each step you take on the floor pad, the pool tears apart and oozes together again, never appearing the same as before. Part of the fun is seeing what designs or words your feet can paint on the space before your trail fades.

Like almost all of the pieces in the exhibit, "Healing Pool" uses projectors and cameras to capture movements. But Knap also incorporated a set of sophisticated algorithms to create the glowing pool of organic patterns on the floor. It's the same system that influences the stripes on a zebra — they are always similar but never identical.

No clicks or clacks

While works like "Boundary Functions" and "Healing Power" are addictive in the footwork they entail, Daniel Rozin's "Peg Mirror" and "Snow Mirror" are more contemplative and soothing.

When you stand in front of "Snow Mirror," digital particles land on your outline as if you're a snowman in a storm. The moment you move, however, the particles break up and disintegrate as though they were swept by a gust of wind.

"Peg Mirror" is made of 650 circular wood pieces cut at an angle to spin silently and mirror your image. As they spin, the values of their beveled ends correspond to the dark and light areas of your reflected image. It's a digital photo, of sorts, of your body that will have you gazing in wonder.

"It's very simple, very beautiful; it's made of wood, yet it's high-tech digital," said Daniel Keegan, director of the art museum. "I think it's one of the things that digital arts do really well, and artists working with technologies, they figure out a way to take very simple tools and materials and almost give you this magical sort of presentation. It's so simple, it's so elegant ... and it's quiet. There aren't gears running and things clicking and clacking."

Magic and metaphor

No piece in “Act/React” stretches the imagination further than Janet Cardiff’s “To Touch” — a worn and marked-up wood table that erupts with mysterious stories when it’s touched.

The table stands illuminated in the center of an otherwise darkened room lined with dozens of speakers. When you touch the table, phrases like “your skin’s so soft” and “I remember the feeling of dried blood” are spoken — and whispered — by male and female voices.

The more space you cover on the tabletop, the more you hear, including screeching tires, knives scraping each other, circus music and a woman whispering the ABCs. All of it swells to create a spooky experience.

“Act/React” is guest curated by George Fifield, a Milwaukee native and the founding director of Boston Cyberarts. For him, the exhibition has been a dream since he saw similar work being shown at a digital art conference in 2000.

But the art shown in “Act/React,” Fifield noted, is more about magic and metaphor than it is about technology.

“The history of installation art in digital media and new media has always been mediated by an interface, whether it’s a keyboard or a mouse, whether it was a touch-screen panel” Fifield said. “The thing about being able to show interactive art without interface is that suddenly you’re cut free from the technology. You don’t have to have any special knowledge, you don’t have to know how to manipulate the tools. You just bring your intuitive sense about how to move through space.”



People walk across a floor at “Act/React” at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Photographer: KEVIN POIRIER

Location: MILWAUKEE WISCONSIN

Date: Oct 01, 2008



Milwaukee Art Museum Senior Director of Communication Elysia Borowy-Reeder moves in front of a screen. Her movements change the art on the screen.

Photographer: KEVIN POIRIER

Location: MILWAUKEE WISCONSIN

Date: Oct 01, 2008



Elysia Borowy-Reeder stands in front of a screen. Her movements change the art on the screen. The display is part of the interactive art exhibit “Act/ React” on display at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Photographer: KEVIN POIRIER

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