LEISURE & ARTS

The Gallery: Invasion of the Cyber Geeks

At SFMOMA, Artists Explore the Possibilities of New Mediums; Virtual Worlds, Pixel People

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San Francisco

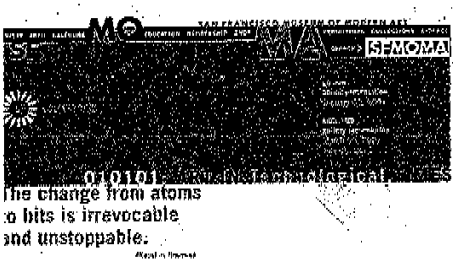
AS ITS CONTRIBUTION to the recent turn of the millennium, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has put together a diverse and provocative show called "01.01.01: Art in Technological Times." The title refers to the pulsing, on-off code of digital technology on which most of the exhibits are based.

Which is not to say that all of them have to be plugged in. Four of the artists chosen still paint on canvas or draw on paper. Their drawings and paintings are based on computer generated images, but these handmade works can't compete with the real thing: Jeremy Blake's glowing digital C-prints projected through flat plasma screens, paintings made of light that live and breathe through evocative, repeating seven-and-a-half-minute cycles. Handcrafted sculptures by Lee Bul (a giant white polyurethane creature sprouting tendrils and wings) and Sarah Sze (an exploded, fancifully decorated cherry-red Jeep Cherokee, parts of which spill through three levels of the museum atrium) might have been created in the predigital era, although their apocalyptic intimations are very much of today.

At the opposite end of the scale are works in which the artist touches no part of the finished thing: Handcraft is irrelevant, concept is all, technology rules. Jochem Hendricks invented a head-mounted "eye scanner" that records the movements of his eyeballs as he looks at something, then converts these into data fed to a computer printer. The result is a machine-drawn scribble that alludes to both the object and the act of looking. In Roxy Paine's sculpture-making device, custom software directs a machine to deposit gooey lumps of pigmented polyethelene—every lump is different—onto a conveyer belt. Karin Sander organized the creation of 22 1:10-scale plastic models of real people (including SFMOMA director David Ross) by way of 360-degree photoscans translated into onscreen "wire models." Translated back into code, these three-dimensional diagrams order a computer-driven plastic extruder to construct miniature figures out of cross-sectional slices, which are then hand-painted to match the originals. These machine-made little clones are every bit as creepy as they sound.

The work on display at SFMOMA never seems quite as profound or epoch-defining as the way-cool catalog and ubiquitous "think texts" (McLuhan, Baudrillard, Negroponte, that crowd) would have us believe. But almost none of it is vaporous, narcissistic or boring, which sets it apart from most high-tech art exhibitions I have seen. Digitally doctored photographs, sound-art installations, computer-generated furniture, and video projections have been carefully chosen to display what 39 artists or teams from 13 countries are currently making of the wired world we live in. (Most of them are under 40, a third of them are women.)

I was simultaneously fascinated and depressed by an endless circuit of grim video vistas shot (by Heike Baranowsky) from a car driving around the Boulevard Périphérique in Paris. They are projected in mirror-image loops on two walls of a room. In a dark chamber, I donned the wired helmet and vest required to "immerse" myself into Char Davies's 15-minute virtual environment, in which movements of the head and body influence the floating, surreal world one perceives.



The exhibit *can be viewed on the Web at www.010101.sfmoma.org.*

"01.01.01" also has an online component, which can be experienced anywhere, at any time, by anyone with a reasonably fast computer and Internet connection. The five newly commissioned Web sites opened to the public in the first minute of the new year, making a clever pun of the exhibition's title.

Three of the online artists or artist teams use as their material existing commercial or institutional sites, which they manipulate and transform in order to comment on life in cyberspace today. (Internet art—a genre all of six years old—can be obsessively self-referential: many of its creators seem unaware of any worlds beyond their computer displays.) In "e-poltergeist," Alison Craighead and Jon Thomson parody the manic proliferation of flipping banner ads that infect certain pornographic sites. As the user tries in vain to clear these from the screen, a moaning noise rises and cries for help appear from the ghost in your machine.

Mark Napier has made a reputation in the inbred family of Internet artists by composting or ripping up existing e-messages and Web pages into unusual and everchanging patterns. In his newest creation, called "Feed," the viewer chooses one of a list of commercial Web sites, the underlying code of which is then interpreted by nine built-in algorithms. The results appear in nine onscreen boxes, as compressed words and images, a changing grid of tiny tiles, a fever chart, a scattering of black dots, a bright abstract painting (etc.), each of which represents some aspect of the chosen site. The viewer-participant can shrink or enlarge these rectangles and drag them to different places about the screen, co-creating a changing work of art. With some luck, Mr. Napier's experiments can result in visually elegant patterns, like the images generated by fractal equations.

Most interesting to me were two audio-visual narratives populated by pixel-made people. Matthew Ritchie, an English painter, uses the same soft jigsaw-puzzle facets and warm, appealing tones in his electronic tales that he uses in his hand-painted work. In "The New Place," he invites the user to select one of three layers (air, earth or water) and watch as computer-drawn clouds, waves, rocky islands, rain and bubbles grow, shift and rotate, appearing to pull one deeper and deeper into the world inside the monitor. In time, a strange seed appears at the heart of the image. Click on it, and an "avatar"—a monstrous Golem, a pudgy swimmer, a strange baby—begins its own cycle of growth, transformation and decay, matching a poetic onscreen text.

Aurelia Harvey of New York joined forces with Michaël Samyn of Belgium in 1999 to form EntropyßZuper!. Apart and together, they have created the most captivating Web-art sites of the 300 or so I have looked at so far.

"Eden.Garden 1.0" is the latest in their impressive series of multilayered multimedia creations. In this voluptuous, computer-created world, the participant can move about a sensuously colored cartoon Paradise by pressing any one of seven directional keys. The changing digital landscape (which at first seems to scroll infinitely up and down, right and left) is gradually and erratically populated by running animals, swooping birds and swarming butterflies, furnished with growing trees, exploding volcanoes and dazzling rainbows. Voices chant continuously and read lines from the Book of Genesis; day turns to night. Through it all Adam and Eve—figleafed nudes modeled after the two artists—writhe, run, twitch and fall about, at distances and angles we select. Mr. Ritchie, Ms. Harvey and Mr. Samyn are serious artists by any standard, working with considerable success in a very new medium.

All the San Francisco online commissions may be viewed at www.010101.sfmoma.org, but not easily. This an aggressively arty, user-challenging site which, like a lot of Internet art, takes some tricky navigating to find your way in and around. (It can also be seen at www.artmuseum.net, a site maintained by Intel Corp., chief underwriter of the exhibition.)

These 39 artists have little in common, except insofar as they are all using or responding to turn-of-the-century technology. The overall effect of the exhibition is that of experiments still in process, in which the signal-to-noise ratio can sometimes be low. But a new realm of art, reflecting an increasingly dehumanized world, is being visibly and audibly born. The best of these techno-based artists may help us to become more critically aware of the radical changes new technology has imposed on our lives, for both better and worse.

"01.01.01" is scheduled to remain on view, both on- and offline, until July 8. New Yorkers (and Web searchers everywhere) can explore a similar pair of shows at the Whitney Museum—called "Bitstreams" and "Data Dynamics"—which will run from March 22 to June 10.

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