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ART : Awash in a Dance of Colors : What happens when computer software and imagination combine to fashion art from beams of light? Virtual art.

November 19, 1995 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | *Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar*

Jennifer Steinkamp makes virtual art. However, her installations of abstract colored light take place in the mundane realm of unvirtual reality, which, in this case, is the ACME Gallery in Santa Monica (through Dec. 10).

"SWELL," as her piece is titled, consists of a long horizontal wall awash in dancing particles of light floating in a sea of deep blue. It is joined to a vertical presentation of the same pattern that conveys a disorienting sensation of being submerged in an ebb and flow of brilliant color. A soundtrack simulating the hollow noise of a snowstorm was created by Bryan Brown (the drummer for the king of surf music, Dick Dale).

The effect is like being on the floor of the ocean where currents toss bits of sand and kelp this way and that. Steinkamp smiles, mysteriously, and says that was precisely her intention. "I wanted you to feel like you were underwater and looking up at the surface," she says.

Although water is prominent in much of her work, Steinkamp chalks it up to software, not symbolism. She explains: "The software has tools that simulate nature. I think the patterns are based on sine waves for water. I always try and go for the motion that I feel works for me and I like the feeling of water. I did one piece at Food House that people said made them feel seasick. Which I thought was a great response."

One of the appealing ironies of Steinkamp's work is that its unabashedly lush, sensuous quality is generated by computer graphics. It may look like Monet's waterlilies for the 21st Century, but it is achieved virtually. Steinkamp's studio is the computer lab of Art Center College of Art and Design, where she is both assistant administrator and a faculty member of the computer graphics department. There, for the last nine years, she has worked with what she calls "cutting-edge software," called Alias, to generate three-dimensional special effects similar to what you would find in the movies.

A pale, soft-spoken woman of 36, with long dark hair and a square, determined jawline, Steinkamp dismisses accolades for her abilities on the computer. "I use the software in the most basic way. I'm not animating dinosaurs or anything that complex. I work in an abstract manner responding to whatever the site is. But it's not something you would put on a demo reel for special effects.

"I go to the site, take measurements, feed them into the computer, make a model of the site on the computer, then I can look at it from various points of view. I work virtually. I can calculate how projections of my work will fit into the site. At times I'll create a simulation on video, especially if I don't have access to the site. These are the same tools as those used for virtual reality."

Although Steinkamp's work is created within the computer, it is actualized as an animation sequence and put onto a videotape or laser disc for presentation.

She times the repeat action to coincide with human breathing in four- or eight-second loops.

Her work has been included in many group exhibitions dedicated to video, photography, even drawing. "I'm always the odd person out, though," she says. Only once has she been in a "computer art" show and that was at Art Center last summer. But she thinks that's a good thing. "Most computer art is terrible," she opines.

In December, a solo installation of her work opens at Miami's Museum of Contemporary Art. For New Year's Eve, she is assisting composer Jimmy Johnson, who has contributed ambient compositions for two of her pieces, and his band GRAIN, in providing the atmosphere for a downtown L.A. rave called "Circa '96." Next year, she is scheduled for an installation at the Kunsthalle Lophem in Brugge, Belgium, and is included in the survey exhibition "Hidden in Plain Sight," organized by Maurice Tuchman, senior curator emeritus for the L.A. County Museum of Art.

On the surface, the inclusion of her work in this last show seems curious, since it is meant to examine the nature of representation and illusion in 20th-Century art. But Steinkamp explains the logic at work. "I thought it was odd at first, but then I realized my work is about illusion in a way. It's meant to dematerialize architecture," she says.

She carefully positions her patterns of throbbing electronic hues in an architectural context to eliminate or accentuate building details. The ACME piece effectively transforms a plain white wall into a field of dancing light. For the opening of the Huntington Beach Art Center last summer, she projected a tangerine and blue jewel of light that pulsated on the outside and inside of the structure. At the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin, Ohio, a projected sphere of computer-generated color rolled ominously toward and then away from the edge of a second-story window banded with an ornate iron balcony.

But is it art? Steinkamp is representative of a generation of artists who were trained equally in the graphic and fine arts. Although she attended six semesters as a graphic arts major at Art Center in 1980 and 1981, she found herself taking so many courses in fine arts that she couldn't achieve a degree. Instead, she went to New York City, where she spent the next few years in the burgeoning field of special effects computer graphics for a now-defunct company called Fantastic Animation. She made some abstract and experimental films on her own but found that special effects production work was all-consuming. "You don't have time for anything else," she recalls.

By 1986, she was burned out by the 80-hour workweeks, had come to hate her job and decided to move back to L.A. "For the weather," she admits sheepishly. But, in New York, she had become something of an old master in computer graphics. She was hired by Art Center and, while teaching, completed, in 1989, the requirements for bachelor's and master's degrees in fine arts.

As the eldest daughter of stockbroker parents growing up in Minneapolis, Steinkamp was given "all kinds of lessons--piano, flute, guitar, dance, skating." On vacations with her four siblings, her parents would insist on going to the art museums. As a youngster, she says, she not only discovered her artistic bent, but also her technical side as well. "I ripped my bike apart and then put it all together again," she recalls.

Although she does not paint, she cites Jackson Pollock as a favorite, mainly for the sense of movement in his works. More predictably, she recognizes the influence of James Turrell, known for his installations of light, and experimental filmmaker Hollis Frampton. She knows that her own work is taking place on aesthetic terra incognita. Since the computer can accomplish so much, she feels a responsibility to establish her own guidelines to maintain a certain focus.

"I never take anything from reality," she says, seriously. "I never use live footage or manipulate reality, like taking the image of a face and swirling it into a

vortex. The image is always generated from the software. I feel like I'm researching within that given set of parameters."

"SWELL," ACME Gallery, 1800 B Berkeley St., Santa Monica. Hours: Wednesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Through Dec. 10. Phone: (310) 264-5818.