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Art Review: High-tech art looks at man and machine relationships

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By Mary Thomas, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

An androgynous pair of clean-shaven heads, their faces turned inward, swivel atop elegant long necks, nuzzling one another in a gliding motion, their separate contours occasionally dissolving, flesh into flesh.

The image is stark, the video short (20 seconds) and the piece mesmerizing. Why?

Some would argue that Jose Carlos Casado's "Inside v. 04" holds attention through several repetitive loops because we find our species to be endlessly fascinating, even when we're looking at almost abstracted images on a backlit screen.

The curator and artists of "Can We Fall in Love With a Machine?" at Wood Street Galleries go so far as to suggest that, as technology becomes more sophisticated, the man-machine relationship has potential to surpass the simplistic fascination that gimmickry affords.

Guest curator Claudia Hart recently posed the question to a group of artists and theorists, the latter presenting their thoughts at an academic conference last month. Having guest-curated and exhibited at Wood Street previously, Hart proposed the exhibition to director Murray Horne, who's established a reputation for support of new media work, and he provided an art venue.

Though a variety of technology is employed -- including voice recognition, robotics, touch-screen responses, synthesized vocals and a biofeedback handset -- the exhibition is accessible to the average visitor. But this entertaining sampler of new media works may also be read on deeper layers.

Somewhat surprising, but illustrating art-world continuity, is the degree to which works in the show allude to art history and/or employ studio art devices.

Several, for example, are displayed in frames. Eerie, moon-faced "Oscar," a "real-time interactive portrait" with searing blue eyes and pivoting head by Catherine Ikam and Louis Fleri, resides within a frame set upon a traditional wooden easel. The "Perversely Interactive System" of Lynn Hughes and Simon Laroche convincingly employs perspective to make a projected figure appear to move into three-dimensional space. The punch of Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries' "Subject Hello" comes partially from a knowing application of graphics and color (see also www.yhchang.com). Casado's work calls to mind Ken Feingold's computer-driven sculpture in the 2002 Whitney Biennial.

Hart's "Sleeping Beauty," made in collaboration with Michael Ferraro, and Mary Ellen Strom's "Nude No. 3, Dillon Paul" (each of which are details of larger projects), both reference a panoply of reclining female nudes, from Titian to Ingres to Manet and beyond. Strom cites as influence Velazquez's "Venus."



The "Perversely Interactive System" of Lynn Hughes and Simon Laroche convincingly employs perspective to make a projected figure appear to move into three-dimensional space in the "Can We Fall in Love With a Machine?" exhibition.

Hart is an internationally respected artist with feminist leanings who teaches in the Department of Computer Graphics and Interactivity at Pratt Institute, New York. Most of her students, she notes, are "hormonally overactive" adolescent males, and she's received a large percentage of student work that features "porn-tinged" characters inspired by those in video games. Her "Sleeping Beauty" -- woman-designed, calm in motion, counter to the violent gaming world -- "rejects the voyeurism of the historical odalisque and is sensual rather than pornographic," Hart asserts. Well, maybe, when fully interactive. But the curvaceous, sexually articulated body, buoyantly settled upon a divan, still appears vulnerable and passive, more akin to the inflatable figure of T. Foley's film "Licence," recently shown at SPACE gallery, than a consciousness-raising equal participant.

Contradicting expectations, the work that is the most emotionally engaging, and successful, employs neither human form nor voice, though humans are there in absentia. "Fish-Bird Circle B - - movement C," by Mari Velonaki in collaboration with roboticists David Rye, Steve Scheduling and Stefan Williams, comprises two empty wheelchairs fitted with devices that randomly print out and eject phrases such as "Can praise erase insults" or "Everyone left and no one returned."

Only two visitors at a time are permitted into the contained space that the chairs, with the help of sensing devices, move freely within. As they interact with each other and with the visitor, a visual language based on behavioral precedence establishes a relationship and to some extent even conveys personality.



Jose Carlos Casado's "Inside v. 04," is a video animation at Wood Street Galleries.

While contemporary visitors' familiarity with technology is a plus, it paradoxically also detracts from the experience, removing the air of mystery that would project the works from amusement to wonder. From museum displays and Disney World to automatic tellers -- not to mention movies, the Web and ubiquitous television -- such apparatus as touch screens, video and voice recognition have lost their futurist edge.

That said, while I was there, two young girls stopped by to visit DiNA, a "voice recognition bot" by Lynn Hershman Leeson and a four-person techno staff. "What is your name?" the not-too-dismembered voice asked as they approached, later stating "My name is DiNA." The girls giggled, chatted a while, and scooted out the door. Perhaps they'll visit again tomorrow.

And as machines gain larger presence in contemporary life, perhaps, as has happened with pets, they'll be granted new status as companions and partners.

"Fall" continues through April 1 at 601 Wood St., Downtown. Noon to 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays and noon to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. Admission is free; 412-471-5605 or www.woodstreetgalleries.org

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