Feast for the eyes and mind
Computer-generated images began more than 50 years ago

By Alan G. Artner | Tribune critic
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The first "must-see" exhibition of 2008 is a survey of a kind of art that began more than a half century ago and has thrived in recent decades though has not had an overview in the Chicago area before this revelatory effort that occupied organizers eight years.

"Imaging by Numbers: A Historical View of the Computer Print," at Northwestern University's Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, presents the development of a way of working that grew from the optimism of 1950s mathematicians and engineers and, despite the perpetual clamor for something "new" in the art world, has remained cutting edge.

All of the 39 North American and European artists represented have used clear step-by-step procedures to get computers to draw images. Some resembled those created by the human hand in categories such as landscape, portrait, figure study and abstraction. But others introduced forms and techniques not in artists' vocabularies by using what once was called space-age technology to create an "art of tomorrow" today.

A pioneer was Ben F. Laposky, the Iowa sign painter whose images photographed from an oscilloscope were shown in a solo exhibition at Illinois Institute of Technology 16 months ago. Two of his "electronic abstractions" from 1952 are the earliest works on view, followed a decade and more by similar work from the Viennese mathematician/artist Herbert W. Franke. These images, reminiscent of modern abstract sculptures by Naum Gabo and others, hold up today as much more than historical curiosities.

Beginning in the mid-'60s, a number of artists learned to program computers, and most of the exhibitors write their own software, though several combine the results with conventional print processes. Many earlier pieces therefore have content resembling more orthodox prints; some, such as the "Scroll Landscape" by Charles and Colette Bangert and plotter drawings by Peter Beyls, Manfred Mohr and Georg Nees, are impressive nonetheless.

Thereafter, the source of such impressiveness often is a combination of unfamiliar looking units multiplied to achieve staggering complexity. Little here is simple after, say, David Em's 1979 dye-destruction print of a computer monitor display. The size of pieces gets larger, color more varied, some works migrate from paper to wall and underlying concepts become more important than the prints themselves. Still, visual complexity remains an unspoken standard, so even when more recent works appear abstruse (Hans Dehlinger, Sherban Epure, Jason Salavon) they feed the eye as well as nourish the mind.

"Imaging by Numbers: A Historical View of the Computer Print" continues at Northwestern University's Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, 40 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston, through April 6; a symposium, "Patterns, Pixels and Process: Discussing the History of the Computer Print," is scheduled from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Feb. 16. 847-491-4000.

Acquisitions: The contemporary art department at the Art Institute of Chicago is steadily acquiring works prior to the new Modern Wing opening in 2009. The latest group includes a monumental wood sculpture by Charles Ray; a 2004 LED installation by Jenny Holzer; and nearly 20 video works by such artists as Pierre Huyghe, Doug Aitken, William Kentridge and Shirin Neshat. The Ray and Holzer pieces came through combinations of gifts; the video works from Chicago collectors Howard and Donna Stone.