

Bit by bit, putting it together
Plug into 50 years of computer art at the Block.

By Lauren Weinberg



James Paterson, Untitled VI, 2005.

Before you trade in your dream of being an artist for a career in science, consider refusing to choose between the two. Some of the most avant-garde art of the 1950s and 1960s was produced by mathematicians and engineers like Ben F. Laposky, who photographed the electronic waveforms produced by his hacked oscilloscope, and A. Michael Noll, who made his abstract drawings with a plotter and room-sized computer.

With “Imaging by Numbers: A Historical View of the Computer Print,” Northwestern University’s Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art illuminates 50 years of an art form that—until recently—has been almost entirely overlooked in the United States. Senior curator Debora Wood and Chicago-based artist Paul Hertz have spent eight years indefatigably planning this exhibition: Their challenges have ranged from defining its scope—the show, though extensive, presents only American and European drawings, prints and artists’ books made with the aid of computers—to finding surviving works of art in a genre that so eagerly pursued the latest technology that it forgot about preservation. (A small companion exhibition, “Space, Color, and Motion,” presents motion graphics by Jean-Pierre Hébert, Manfred Mohr, James Paterson and C.E.B. Reas.)

At first, both universities and institutions such as Bell Labs and NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory believed in the “creative potential” of computers, but some artists did not. One accosted German artist-engineer Georg Nees at a show and demanded, “But can your machine embody all that is human, all that is creative?” (Nees replied, “If you can define human creativity, I can write a program to make it.”) While early adopters such as Laposky were concerned with developing new, aesthetically pleasing forms, Nees’s generation viewed programming itself as the art form and relished their ability to insert random elements into tightly controlled compositions. One highlight of the exhibition is *Large Landscape: Ochre and Black*, a beautiful piece by Charles Jeffries and Colette Stuebe Bangert with lines and curves—only partly controlled by the artists—that perfectly represent the Kansas prairie where the couple lived.

By 1970, some traditionally educated fine artists had become so intrigued by computers that they learned how to write programs themselves. Harold Cohen, an English artist working at Stanford’s

Artificial Intelligence Lab, “taught” his controversial software AARON how to draw—or at least how to combine elements such as human figures and trees into countless unique works.

Early computer artists had to be especially creative when their desires outstripped their equipment. Lacking a color printer, Joan Truckenbrod placed her Apple IIe monitor on a color photocopier to produce *Electronic Patchwork*, a 1978 quiltlike wall hanging covered in graphics reminiscent of video games. But soon afterward, desktop publishing and programs such as Adobe Photoshop expanded artists’ boundaries dramatically. The young guns with whom this excellent exhibition concludes—Paterson, Reas and Joshua Davis—simply see the computer as an extension of their sketchbooks: an unusually powerful tool for expressing their artistic ideas.

“Imaging by Numbers” and “Space, Color, and Motion” run through April 6.