
Posted on Thu, Mar. 13, 2003

Cutting-edge collage

NEW TECHNOLOGY FOR OLD ART FORM CAPTURES THE PACE OF MODERN LIFE

By Jack Fischer
Mercury News

For artists, the practice of cut-and-paste is a venerable one, with roots far deeper than personal computing. Collage has been a mainstay in art circles at least since Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso used it to develop cubism almost 100 years ago.

It never really went away. Few things evoke the rat-a-tat-tat of the modern world as well as collage, and joining disparate visual phenomena to find coherence has become a fundamental skill in an era when visual media reign supreme. In today's 300-channel, hyper-linked world, its relevance may be greater than ever.

So the current show at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art is a natural.

"`Bytes & Pieces: The Art of Contemporary Collage" explores what 15 artists have made of the form now that scissors and glue pot have given way to computer scanning and Photoshop. Digital convergence -- where film, photos, sounds and essentially all visual and auditory phenomena can be expressed in common terms of bits and bytes -- creates possibilities for collage that Braque probably never dreamed of.

Of the ICA show's many artists, perhaps Jim Campbell understands these possibilities better than anyone. Trained in electrical engineering and mathematics rather than art, Campbell is steeped in the information theory that underpins the digital realm.

Here, Campbell has taken motion pictures and averaged the light and dark areas of every frame into a single image, creating a sort of collage across time. His composite still of the movie "`Psycho," in particular, becomes compelling as a viewer searches the hazy patterns of the image for hints of the thriller. Quite apart from the subject matter, Campbell's work invites rumination on the nature of information, notably the question: How much is enough to form meaning?

Lewis DeSoto's collages also play with collaging in time. In this case, the artist photographed a patch of grass and leaves at 1/1000 of a second, then superimposed the same image from the same perspective, but captured over the course of a full second, to show the minute differences made by the passage of time.

Kathryn Dunlevie starts with a photograph from everyday life -- say, a swimming pool -- then manipulates it digitally, multiplying and flip-flopping elements, and then painting on them, to visually re-weave the real world into a dreamscape that also becomes a formal study of shapes and colors.

Luz Marina Ruiz's three-dimensional assemblages may be the most traditional work in the show. Ruiz draws inviting organic shapes like horns and shards with what seem to be pastels, then scans and tweaks them in Photoshop before reassembling them in ways that evoke the shapes of African tribal art.

In such works as "`Kyoto II: Omiyage," Lyn Bishop takes a low-tech standby, the lenticular print, and makes it as dazzling as any hologram. If you ever bought Cracker Jacks as a kid and got as your prize a plastic picture that changed when you tilted it, you know the lenticular print. But that's primitive, compared with what an artist today can achieve by manipulating form on a computer.

Bishop's entrancing collages of traditional Japanese iconography hover in the air disconcertingly and demand your complete attention to make them sit still -- a kind of enforced art appreciation that the contemporary world's avalanche of images makes advisable if you want to get someone to notice.

Indeed, getting a viewer's attention may be tougher than ever in this media saturated age. But *holding* attention is unchanged from Braque's day. Manipulating images with technology can't substitute for artistic vision, and collage remains most effective when all its visual elements contribute to a narrative or formal mood. To the extent that the ICA's artists do so, "`Bytes and Pieces" does a fine job of suggesting the form's new possibilities.

Bytes & Pieces: The Art of Contemporary Collage

Where: San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, 451 S. First St., San Jose

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursdays; noon-5 p.m. Saturdays

Through: April 5

Admission: Free

Information: (408) 283-8155, www.sjica.org

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