

ABQJournal Online » Tools Meet Imagination

Santa Fe is the beneficiary, yet again, of multiple generations of generous artists, musicians, writers and enthusiasts choosing to make their homes here. While the arts are contracting in major cities across the U.S., the “currents 2011” exhibition of new media has established itself as another major event in our summer season.

Like last year’s very impressive “currents 2010” this version was made possible by the leadership of artists and impresarios Mariannah Amster and Frank Ragano, and they have again rented warehouse space at Museo Cultural in the Railyard. Since they began producing – a designation they prefer to curating – new media exhibitions in 2002, Amster and Raggano have built successively more sophisticated and larger events from a baseline of welcome and inclusion. All art works on view are selected from an open call to artists around the world. They present innovative, state-of-the-art work in an understated elegant, convivial environment and all events are free during accessible, extended hours.

If this all sounds too good to be true, it feels that way ... like a giant gift from artists who are thrilled to finally have tools that can meet their imaginations. During the past 10 years open source software and digital imaging tools and have become relatively available. By my count, there are 83 artists – including at least a dozen collaborative teams of two or three artists – who often live in different cities while working on the same digital platform. Beautiful and astonishing pieces are on view, including the visual music made from images of a woman folding laundry by Surabhi Saraf. Like the rest of this show, Saraf’s sparkling, bristling, fluttering grid of 8-by-12 “windows” deserves repeat visits. While her shifts in bright shapes and colors from blue to red to green grabbed attention in the darkened hall during in the cacophony of opening night, many subtle changes of movement and tempo need quiet to be heard and appreciated. For example, the sound of jeans being shaken or the snap of a sari ripple like a drum roll through horizontal strips of sound and image.

Hisao Ihara’s projection from above onto a field of broken plasterboard on the floor also needs to be heard as well as seen. In seven short minutes the viewer/listener moves

If you go

WHAT: “currents 2011”

WHEN: Through July 19.

WHERE: El Museo de Cultural de Santa Fe, 1615-b Paseo de Peralta

CONTACT: <http://currents2011.com/scheduleofevents.html>

from upheaval and panic

to Louis Armstrong’s “When You Wish Upon a Star.” Titled “Under” and inspired by Japan’s March 12th earthquake/tsunami disaster, it is a tender homage to the terrible beauty of life forces and the brilliance of a night sky in a place darkened by the disappearance of artificial ambient light.

In today’s art world, this gathering of work feels like the proverbial breath of fresh air running in a parallel stream alongside narrow insider playing fields where one-liners and pointless extravagance are passed off as art. Here, there are many fine examples of complex ideas, intellectual engagement, and sustained craft. Another highlight discovered during opening weekend was a contemplative corner given over to the hyper-vigilance of a white bird, a ghostly apparition minutely attuned to every incidence. It is the work of Shaun Irons and Lauren Petty, who also did a performance on opening weekend, as did Sarabhi Saraf.

Many of the installations are interactive. A standout is “Window Exchange” by Mike Root, Brian Bixby and Charles Buckingham. Although it needs to be a wall projection instead of a freestanding screen (the screen cuts off your feet i.e., ground), when you walk past the post-apocalyptic heap of civilization in ruin your body’s shadow opens up a “window” into verdant wilderness.

Dr. Woohoo’s interactive fields of floating, whimsical, undersea creatures always delights, and this year he has added the third dimension of in-and-out to up-and-down and sideways for playful participants to affect. Precise geometry, often an early 1970s light installation concern, turns up the vibratory buzz when bodies approach “Nervous Structure” by Cristobal Mendoza and Annica Cuppetelli.

Two small sculptures are notable for their economy and presence — a simple wooden chair with an iPad cartoon back and an astro-turf seat by Victor K. Romero-Orihuela, and a cauldron containing a cloud with the shadow of a raven in flight by Matthew Chase-Daniels (another artist/producer and a founder/curator of Axle Contemporary).

This year's "currents" presentation is bigger than last year's, with more moving parts. In addition to installations and projections and single channel pieces on flat screens grouped into programs, there is a new area set-up for games and web art. Four computers were humming, chairs occupied on both my visits with gamers intensively involved in the animation of "Machinarium" by a group calling themselves Amanita Design, as well as connecting the dots of "88 Constellations for Wittgenstein" by David Clark.

For the first time this year there was a showing of pieces made for the Institute of American Indian Art's full theater digital dome display. This new technology using multiple projectors is still in the development phase for artists and although it was a wholly uneven one-hour program, one particularly rewarding and sweet piece lingers in memory. Lea Weber-Schäfer depicts a lone person interacting with puzzling, eccentric shadows.

Back at headquarters, some of the masters of new media should not be missed, such as David Stout and Corey Metcalf's layered chameleon "El Umbral," a gateway that shifts from ominous surveillance mode to Asian-inflected serenity, along with the stunning exactitude of Bob Campbell and Yuki Nakamura's "Floating Plaster/City Motion." Å

When last year's "currents 2010" opened the same night as SITE Santa Fe's Eighth Biennial, the "currents" new media exhibition felt more like a biennial than the Biennial. It was fresher, more thrilling, and had a lot less to prove. It felt like a festival and a celebration of new art and trends. SITE's "the dissolve" was a very tightly focused exhibition investigating the history of camera animation using hand-made drawings, the kind of historical exhibition where works of art are selected to illustrate curators' arguments. While such endeavors may build fundamental academic categories, they eschew the jostling, generative juxtapositions of biennial-type catholic shows. It is noteworthy that more than a dozen of the "currents" artists are from Santa Fe and, apparently, many artists in the exhibition from large cities and well-funded university towns often feel like isolated practitioners, and are amazed to find the vitality of the mutually supportive, active community here. It turns out that our little city is now a beacon worldwide in this ever-changing, unfolding arena.

Photo Credit – COURTESY PHOTO

Cutline – "Fold" is a single channel video projection by San Francisco-based new media artist Surabhi Saraf.

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