

The Los Angeles Times
20 December 2002

ART; AROUND THE GALLERIES; A quiet riot, in a hothouse setting
By David Pagel

At a time when mindless spectacles are filling museums and American culture is being so aggressively dumbed down that art is on the verge of becoming an underground movement, it's heartening to see the new video installation by Jennifer Steinkamp at Acme Gallery. Titled "Jimmy Carter," the L.A. artist's silent light show is a blast from the past that provides some respite from the horrors of modern life while never making the mistake that art's job is to serve up escapist entertainment.

Thoughtful and ravishing, Steinkamp's dazzling piece of participatory theater is as accessible as anything on television -- and as imaginative as the best art in any medium. It's radical because its optimism is not pie-in-the-sky utopianism but down-to-earth, this-is-it realism. To spend more than a few moments in the darkened gallery is to experience your mind and body working in concert, cooperating to process the generous sensory extravaganza.

Three walls are covered with projected images of thousands of flowers Steinkamp designed on a computer. Arranged in rows that run from floor to ceiling, the artificial asters, chrysanthemums, lilies, orchids and tulips form a rainbow of blazing colors -- screaming yellows, glorious oranges, off-key periwinkles -- all punctuated by verdant greens and gaps of absolute blackness. It's hard to say whether you've stepped into an electronically transmitted hothouse or are somehow standing inside a giant stripe painting whose molecular structure forms an impossible cosmos.

And that's only the beginning. Steinkamp has set her wallflowers in motion. All the rows sway sinuously, in the manner of sea grass pulled back and forth by the surf. Individual blossoms buck the current, their stems and petals bending and twisting. Imagine a meadow jam-packed with flowers so eager to reproduce that they can't wait for bees to pollinate them. The flowers make jittery movements, zipping out of formation to cross-pollinate before looping back into place.

Up close, the cinematic image disintegrates into a grid of pixels that occasionally sit still but never for long. To stand back and take in the whole is to see patterns begin to take shape, only to dissolve into apparent chaos. But Steinkamp's carefully orchestrated

disorder inspires a wider perspective, a big-picture view in which everything just might make sense -- if your imagination's up to the challenge.

Back in the 1950s, Harold Rosenberg coined the term "apocalyptic wallpaper" to describe abstract paintings that failed to convey the aspirations of their makers. Steinkamp's installation turns Rosenberg's term into a virtue: a work of art that is scintillating and scary, aware of its place in the world and bold enough to fly in the face of business as usual.

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