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Digital Habitat: Jennifer Steinkamp
BY HOLLY WILLIS

"Immersion" is a hot buzz word these days, but Los Angeles-based video/installation artist Jennifer Steinkamp has been immersing viewers for years with dazzling abstract computer video installations that layer viewers into images, sandwiching them between multiple projections of lush, moving pixels and a sea of sound. The LA-based artist cops to many influences, including the 1930s abstract animations of Oscar Fischinger and the light and space of artists of the '60s. But it's Gene Youngblood's synaesthetic cinema of the 1970s that offers the best fit. He imagined an "expanded cinema" for all the senses, and Steinkamp comes close to that. Encountering one of her breathtaking installations is like sinking into an ocean of buoyant, swaying, ephemeral light; the abstract shapes fill entire rooms, and motion makes the fixed coordinates of physical space seem strangely mutable. Sound adds another dreamy layer. And while her installations work as psychedelic spectacles, they're also about the relationship of the viewer to what's viewed, and how we influence the world around us.

Steinkamp, who was born in 1958 and attended the California Institute of the Arts and Art Center in Pasadena, California, describes her art succinctly: "Basically, I use light to dematerialize architecture," she says. "I do this by placing an illusionistic space inside of a reel space." To achieve this dematerialization Steinkamp creates richly colored abstract animations that run in loops from DVDs and are projected within a space using several projectors to create huge, multilayered images. She collaborates with musicians to build soundtracks for the pieces, adding yet another layer. As viewers move through one of Steinkamp's spaces, their shadows become interlaced with the projections, and their movements become part of the artwork itself. The result is quite overwhelming.

Steinkamp's 1998 project titled *A Sailor's Life Is a Life for Me,* offers a good example. Featuring pastel colors in the shape of digital waves washing rhythmically over the walls accompanied by the whoosh of water and the bleating of foghorns, the installation is breathtaking - you feel your whole body swaying us you stand caught in the layers of projected waxes. With *They Eat Their Wounded*, made in collaboration with Jimmy Johnson who created the audio, cubes made from flickering flashes of lightning dance and swing, making the corners of the gallery dissolve. And in her must recent project, *Jimmy Carter*, huge fields of colorful flowers sway gently beck and forth across the high

walls of LA's Acme Gallery. For this project, which unlike her others is silent, the artist was less concerned with bodies in space; she says she wanted to pay tribute to the statesman's recent human rights efforts, and indeed, the piece feels like a pretty gift. This is not to say that it lacks visceral impact; instead, rather than flaunting the dissolution of 3-D space and creating a sense of philosophical upheaval, *Jimmy Carter* gently entrances.

In creating her pieces, Steinkamp starts by mapping the actual space that she mill housing; she then remaps that space into the geometric space of the computer. This creates an in-between space that Steinkamp can manipulate, creating new spatial relationships within the architectural space. Light takes on attributes of physicality, becoming almost tangible. And Steinkamp's interest in this transformation is not merely in creating sensations for viewers. Instead, she wants also to help us reconsider how we Conceptualize our relationship with the world, and by extension, with other people. "When you fool around with Cartesian Coordinates, you get to reconsider the relationship between the viewer and the subject," she explains. "Subject and object are no longer in a singular binary relationship."

THE STUDIO

Steinkamp works in a small studio out behind her stylish house in Los Angeles, which she shares with her fluffy dog Cariesta (who is part Dingo!). The studio runs alongside her garage, almost like a hallway, and is assuredly a solid testament to the dictum "Less is more" Indeed, it's hard to believe that from this tidy, uncluttered room, come gigantic moving pictures. But it's true. On the end closest to the door is her printer, and Epson Stylus Photo 750 (1) "It was inexpensive, and I use it mainly for proofing press materials, and since I make prints as well, I use this to see what they'll look like." Next is her spare monitor, an MAE Innovision (2) which she rarely uses now, and her deluxe Powersaver. "If there's a brownout, this gives me half an hour of power." On the floor rests an old Silicon Graphics Indigo 2 Impact 10000. "I've had this since 1996 when I bought it, and I used it until recently. It did a whole series of prints and it runs my Alias software, which I haven't used since I switched to Maya a couple of years ago. But some of my older projects are in Alias, so I really need it." On top of the SGI is her DAT drive (3). Up on the desktop, Steinkamp has a large Silicon Graphics monitor (4), a small mail scale (5) and a monitor switcher (6) in the cubby underneath. Next comes a humble Wacom Tablet (7). "I don't use it very much, because it turns out that Maya isn't very good with it." The svelte speakers (8) on her desk come from Dell. "They look like Barbie speakers," she laughs. "and if they didn't have the subwoofer (under the desk). 1 wouldn't use them." Next up, a Mackie 12-channel mixer (Micro Series 1202 VL2) for mixing audio and checking levels (9). "Now that a lot of the audio is digital, this isn't so necessary for me. But it helps to patch various decks together, or the computer into a deck. I could probably

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do without it, but I like having it." At the far end of Steinkamp's long desk are her JVC Super VHS deck (10) and Aiwa PAL VHS deck (11), a Sony miniDV cassette recorder (12), scanner (13) and Sony Trinitron video monitor (14). "I use the scanner mainly for scanning in articles for my dossier and applying for grants." Circling back under the desk, we find two computers - Steinkamp alternates between a PC, namely the Dell Dimension 8200 and a Mac G4 with a DVD burner, "I do my animation mainly on the Dell, although I can do it on the Mac as well. I have both because the Mac is great for video editing and making DVDs. The Dell is not so good for that - you have to go to great lengths. In making the DVDs for my artwork, I'll make a series of Tiff files and then edit them together in After Effects, then make a QuickTime movie, and then output that to an MPEG-2 movie, and then I'll put that together with the DVD editing software. Sometimes I'll use the surround tool to mix the sound so that it travels across five speakers." Summing up the process, she says, "It's surprisingly easy." Sure it is.