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### **“I think you know what the problem is just as well as I do”**

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Walking into Jennifer Steinkamp’s exhibition feels akin to the zero-gravity mission of Dr. David Bowman in Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey. The work is powerful, disarmingly friendly and compelling, and supremely creepy, as if made by the HAL 9000 sentient supercomputer. In HAL’s words, “I think you know what the problem is just as well as I do.”

Steinkamp’s large-scale video projections use the kind of 3-D animation software employed in movies such as Avatar. Avatar’s proudly animistic and naturistic plot combined with its paradoxical paean to digital technology are a point of comparison to the forces at play in her current exhibition. In the semi-dark main room at the gallery are projected three large-scale works from the artist’s new series, Premature. Though Steinkamp states that the works are about the unpredictable timing of life and death, and is quoted in the gallery’s press release as saying the images possess a “meat-like texture” resembling veins, arteries, and tendons, the writhing coils on display resemble nothing so much as robotic worms – perhaps a cyborg’s conception of human anatomy. The texture of the pastel-colored illuminated ropes is less “meat-like” than smooth and shiny, and there is no indication of pulse or any expansion and contraction mirroring breathing to evoke life.

Premature 3 reads as an oversized, nonsensical cursive: long tubular forms several inches wide loop around mimicking nonexistent letters as they slide down from ceiling to floor. In Premature 2 on the west wall, liquidy-looking ropes twist vertically as though vainly trying to disentangle from one another. Premature 7 has skinny tangled worms the width of a finger that seethe and writhe, undulating like a seaweed-clogged ocean. Around the corner Premature 6 snakes vertically in a corridor, the roughest-hewn of the series and the closest to any microbiological or organic depiction.

The back gallery houses a silent symphony of color and motion encapsulated in Orbit 7, a work separate from the Premature series, depicting swaying tree branches and swirling leaves in a brilliant palette. Orbit 7 presents the four seasons in a heady few minutes, cycling over and over as fictional years speed by. It would be easy to lose a decade in the room, if not two. Summer is a harmonious interplay of mottled pale green leaves springing from lithe branches swaying in powerful gusts of virtual wind. In the quickly-arriving fall, yellow and light brown mix in, soon followed by red and orange. Winter comes and goes in a split second (a subtle reminder that the artist lives in California) embodied by waving branches empty save for a smattering of bright red leftover leaves from fall. Spring arrives with a bang as buds and blooms of pink, blue, and violet burst out from the briefly fallow branches and bright yellow dots rain down the wall like sun glinting off leaves after a rain shower. While it is

easy to be seduced by the visual delight of *Orbit 7*, with its glorious color and kinetic motion, it is also worth noting that this work, more than any other in the exhibition, depicts the cycles of life in nature, from birth to growth to death and decay in a few short minutes. It is both magnificent and deeply unsettling as we seem to hurtle towards inevitable demise while distracted by the beauty unfolding before us. Enjoy yourself, says *Orbit 7*, it's sooner than you think!

The use of cutting edge technology—digital animation in particular – serves as an apt metaphor for fleeting life and its seemingly always “premature” end. Planned obsolescence is inherent to technological advances. With all of our progress, glitches and viruses occur, and even the HAL 9000 proved fallible, prone to a nervous breakdown. Humans are still vitally necessary, if only to fix the computers.

It is nearly impossible to experience Steinkamp's animations without inserting oneself into them, as the projectors are placed deliberately low so that upon approaching the work one's shadow is cast upon it, rendering viewer and work as one. Effectively erasing the boundaries between artwork, technology, and people, the artist creates her own virtual reality, where complete immersion and unmediated experience are the only viable options. Androids may dream of electric sheep, but Steinkamp clearly dreams of electric trees.