

The art of singing life electric

Review: Exhibit highlights technology's place in our lives, and how we live because of it.

By DANIELLA WALSH
Special to the Register

A baby's crib is somewhat out of the ordinary at an art show, but then, this one contains a very unusual baby an infant-sized, amoeba-like, hairy being featuring a tiny mouth and a cry that seems neither human nor animal. This monster baby, created by artist John Slepian, bleats pitifully until one follows a written suggestion to pick it up. However, instead of calming down, the creature, titled "little_one, 2005," gets more desperately noisy and nerve-wracking. All but throwing it back, one wonders who or what it is and why it's here. Here means "Exquisite Electric," a current exhibition of art at the Grand Central Art Center in Santa Ana.

Curated by Jan Christmas and Mike McGee, it aims to explore new media that employ electricity-dependent (hence the title) technological gadgetry and an everevolving human imagination. The curators base their choices on diverse essays and theories on the future of human kind as it becomes more entwined with technology and thus might become a novel entity, in the words of author N. Katherine Hayes, "post-human." Some of the artists, like Slepian, have been trying to pinpoint qualities that make us human, such as compassion or the impulse to nurture that might drive us to "comfort" his ugly and annoying but also provocative creation. What makes this small exhibition compelling is that everything in it either demands visual involvement and/or physical interaction that defies the stereotype of viewers spending roughly one minute before a given work of art. Works range from visually elegant, even beautiful, to outright ugly, but all are well-crafted or assembled. Adam Chapman's monstrous, humanoid apparition imprisoned in a glass cube and invisible until viewers touch a panel is prototypical.

Titled "Nothing Without You, 2003/5," it is particularly fascinating since modern fiction and assorted horror films are becoming filled with such images - proof that our need for titillation grows proportionately to our becoming more sophisticated and jaded. Tony Oursler offers similarly cogent commentary in a small installation consisting of a cloth doll perched on a tripod with a projector and a VCR. "Messed Up and Down, 1992" focuses on the doll's face, which reflects a plethora of (mostly disturbing or disturbed) emotions. It suggests that we are in danger of becoming a society of perpetual whiners, embracing victimhood and shunning responsibility while at the same time deriving voyeuristic pleasure at others' misfortunes.

Jim Campbell's elegant "Fifth Avenue Cutaway #1, 2002" strikes an opposing note. Looking at the shadowy pedestrians passing before suggested skyscrapers in a highly pixilated red and black electronic pictorial construction, one thinks of the sense of alienation life in large cities often brings. Elegantly simple, it is a powerful work - but then one might expect such techno-aesthetic wizardry from an MIT- educated artist whose expertise lies in mathematics and electrical engineering.



TWO WORKS: Adam Chapman's "Cuddle," left, and "Nothing Without You, 2003/5."

PHOTO: COURTESY CSUF GRAND CENTRAL ARTS CENTER

'Exquisite Electric'

Where The CSUF Grand Central Art Center. 125 N. Broadway, Santa Ana

When Through Sept. 18. Art Center hours: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m.-9 p.m.; closed Mondays.

Those with preconceptions of new techno- mediums being intellectually engaging but visually blah will come away surprised. Marianne Magne's two-part video installation, "Transitory Conditions, 2005," is mesmerizingly beautiful. It consists of streaming video loosely suggesting DNA ribbons in motion and the spiritual core of evolution along with still photographs that, through clever visual machination, compress the lengthy metamorphosis of animal into man (and vice-versa, if you will).

What drove me onward though, was nearby "Slepian's Baby," mercifully unheard in the Don Cribb Project Room where Camille Utterback's untitled creation combines visual elements of abstract painting with interactive technology. Here, viewers will be intrigued by a composition that, although a video, has the sensual quality of a painting. Once visitors step on a rubberized mat on the floor, the colorful brush strokes change into black, graffiti-like lines. As one does a little two-step, one assumes the power of creator and destroyer which, in keeping with the curators' theses, lies at the core of humanness, past, present and future.

Exquisite Electric is, quantitatively speaking, a small show, but it packs more material for thought and discussion than larger, more hyped exhibits in the area. After two visits, this recovering technophobe emerged amazed how aptly it reflects, for better or worse, the evolution of our culture.

Where The CSUF Grand Central Art Center. 125 N. Broadway, Santa Ana

When Through Sept. 18.

Art Center hours: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m.-9 p.m.; closed Mondays.

How much Free

Call (714) 567-7233 or (714) 567-7234

Freelancer Daniella Walsh has written about visual art for the Register since 1994.