ART

Spirit in the Machines

A Sydney exhibition brings international computer art on CD-ROM to startling, touchable life

By MICHAEL FITZGERALD

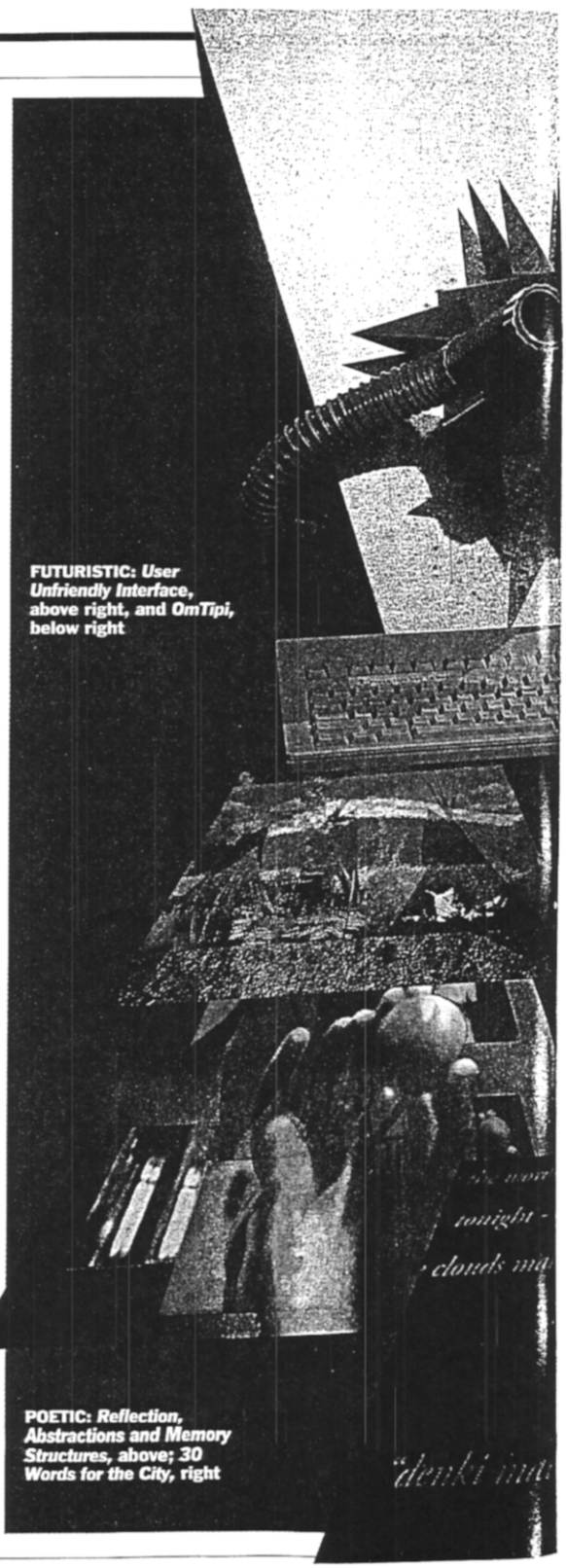
EACH MORNING THE TOP FLOOR of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art resounds like a high-tech zoo as 15 computers are turned on for another day of *Burning the Interface <International artists' CD-ROM>*. Some chime, others bleep or warble like strange electronic birds. Even guest curator Mike Leggett sometimes has trouble keeping this rowdy house in order as the machines crash, freeze, or simply defy logic. "It's a space where things happen," he says of the computer interface, where gallery patrons commune with the art. "It's not a space of control."

Indeed, much of the art on display seems to have a life of its own. Queuing behind the school groups that often monopolize the lily pad clusters of Power Macs, there's a sense of subversive machines at play with willing, sometimes hapless participants. When you get to a screen, click a mouse and anything—or nothing—might happen: from the frenzy of *Antirom*, a randomly selected music video by English group SASS over which you have little or no control, to the stillness of Australian artist Dorian Dowse's *OmTipi*, where a painted outback teepee plays out for 14 hours of fractal ambiance. The world's first major retrospective of computer art on CD-ROM (Compact Disc—Read Only Memory), the exhibition, which runs through to June 30, bravely explores a new frontier.

Using software programs such as Photoshop and Director, 100 artists on 30 discs mix picture, text, animation and sound to create a cacophony of multimedia that blurs the border between art and beholder. As this art relies on the viewer's interaction, every experience is unique. "The art object has not talked back in quite this way before," notes curator Margaret Trail, whose current National Gallery of Victoria exhibition, *Perception and Perspective*, includes computer art in a broader look at art and technology. "A new artistic aesthetic language is emerging," Trail says, "but not only is it very new, and therefore artists are only beginning to work with it in fairly clunky ways, but also audiences don't know how to read it yet either."

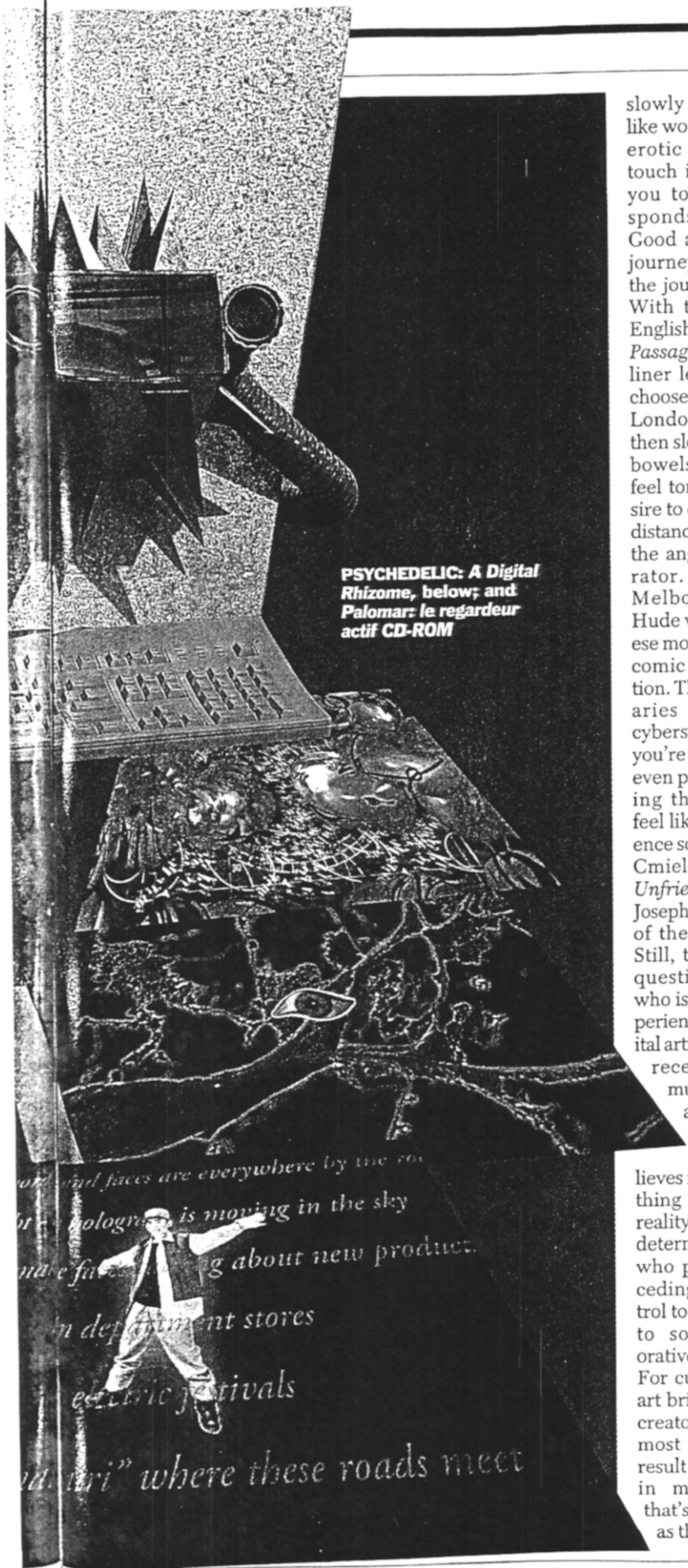
Art has rarely been as talkative as that of *Burning the Interface*. "The next man to touch me dies," growls Linda Dement's *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* when you click on one of the Sydney artist's scanned and animated female body parts. With *Portrait One*, by Canada's Luc Courchesne, you have a virtual conversation with "Marie", a filmed actress who stares out from a black background. "May I ask you something?" she politely inquires. Yes, you click. "Are you staring at me?" she asks. Yes. "I'm looking at your eyes, your mouth, the curve there of your neck. Am I embarrassing you?" Not at all, you insist. "You must be a Virgo with a Pisces ascendant." Much of the work has a peep-show mentality (the American work *BLAM!* makes fun of so-called cyberporn), but when it speaks simply and directly—as Courchesne's does—it is like being in communion with the artist himself.

There is a visceral pleasure in navigating through



FUTURISTIC: ***User Unfriendly Interface*****, above right, and** ***OmTipi*****, below right**

POETIC: ***Reflection, Abstractions and Memory Structures*****, above; 30 Words for the City, right**



PSYCHEDELIC: *A Digital Rhizome*, below; and *Palomar: le regardeur actif* CD-ROM

slowly unraveling, web-like worlds. "It's almost an erotic thing where you touch it and it responds, you touch it and it responds," says Dement. Good art takes you on a journey, and on CD-ROM the journey is everything. With the coolly elegant English photographic work *Passagen*, you begin at airliner level in the clouds, choose a destination from London, Paris or Berlin, then slowly descend to the bowels of the city. "You feel torn between the desire to enjoy the city in the distance and to be amongst the angels," says the narrator. In *Haiku Dada*, Melbourne artist Felix Hude wittily charts Japanese modern mores through comic book-style animation. There are few boundaries or inhibitions in cyberspace. "The fact that you're involved somehow, even peripherally, in moving through it makes it feel like a stronger experience somehow," says Leon Cmielewski, whose *User Unfriendly Interface* with Josephine Starrs is a feature of the Melbourne show. Still, the slightly sinister question remains: Just who is in control of the experience here? Sydney digital artist John Colette, who recently established a multimedia department at the Australian Film Television & Radio School, believes interactivity is something of a misnomer. "In reality, the content is predetermined by the person who produces it, who is ceding navigational control to the user as opposed to some more collaborative, constructive role." For curator Leggett, such art brings the viewer and creator together in an almost psychic union. The result is "something that's in motion, something that's in flux between you as the viewer and what's happening on the screen and how you are envisaging what is happening in the artist's head."

For some artists, it's the only medium for their message. With *Cyberflesh Girlmonster*—"a kind of Frankenstein thing, but digital," says the artist—Dement combines animated body parts with computer scrolls of splatter-pulp fiction to explore ideas to do with voyeurism and sexual violence. "If I can put all of that madness and messiness and difficult stuff into this nice clean, sleek, beige box, it's much easier to deal with," she explains. In the case of *30 Words for the City*, a computer and mouse seem the perfect medium for John Colette's poetic exploration of alienation and existential disconnection.

For others, the medium *is* the message. CD-ROM was designed as an information storage and distribution system, and some artists go overboard with the amount of special effects and labyrinthine detail they cram on disc. It's the technology here that holds your attention, not the art. As *Anti-rom* puts it: "multimedia is endless, restless and useless." But then so is life, some artists might argue, in our virtual-reality age.

It's early days yet, with the medium still defining itself and exploring its possibilities. "I guess it's like if you went back to the early days of cinema, where people just filmed a train going into a station and everyone went 'Wow!'" says Dement. Leggett sees the work on CD-ROM as experiments for an interactive art that will eventually cross over to the Internet. Even he wonders whether a gallery is its rightful home. "I regard this space as a kind of bookshop in which you browse the work and identify the pieces that seem to be of interest," he says.

Perhaps the art's biggest obstacle is a public ambivalent to new technology. Artists Cmielewski and Starrs play up on that mix of fear and fun in *User Unfriendly Interface*. Satirizing the idea that computers are friendly, the pair dress up their installation in a prickly, spiky headdress. Viewers are then forced to crouch down at a keyboard and peer through a pointy viewfinder. The art is just as uncomfortable, asking the viewer to share their PIN or sexual fantasy and spitting out reams of abuse. "I've got a love-hate relationship with technology," says Starrs. "I'm scared of it and I mistrust it and it makes me paranoid, but I'm a bit sucked in. I do spend a lot of time at the computer." These days that relationship is morphing into a high-tech art that simultaneously talks and sings, confounds and delights. At the MCA, the newcomer risks capture in its bittersweet embrace. ■