

# MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Media THE AUSTRALIAN

Date APRIL 12, 1996

## SYDNEY ART

THE exhibitions of CD-ROM art and other interactive works at the MCA focus the mind on a major problem with these works. The intimate relationship between a mouse and its user depends on having enough computers to go around. In these exhibitions this was not the case, and as some of the computers kept on crashing it was simply not possible to see everything.

In addition, most of the works are so engrossing that once a viewer gains access to a machine they will play it for a very long time.

It is hard to find the language to describe these pieces. As one of my more conservative friends says: "I know it's fun, but is it art?" That is an echo of questions down through the centuries as new forms of art have been explored. It was a question raised in the early years of illustrated books when printers started to make woodcut illustrations. Fortunately for the status of fine prints, Albrecht Durer was a truly renaissance man, experimenting with the new technology, making even the most reactionary viewer understand that the quality of art depends on how it looks, not on the way it is made.

The relationship between technology and art is a question raised more recently with photography, but this, too, is now recognised as being visually creative.

Computer-generated art relies on more than a single sensation. It can use sound and movement, but unlike cinema, the art can change with the response of the viewer. Viewers therefore can immerse themselves in the art in a way that is simply not possible with single images frozen in time.

The title *Burning the Interface* comes from the technique of making CD-ROMs, of recording the artists' works for posterity on plastic. CD-ROMs appear to have emerged as standard reproductive technology for at least this decade. Their relative stability is a change from earlier computer art, where the technology moved so fast that the continuation of the piece was dependent on the continued existence of particular machines.

Some of the works on view here, including Bill Seaman's *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers*, have an earlier incarnation using slightly older techniques. It is to be hoped that the combination of relatively stable technology and the ever-expanding World Wide Web will free artists from the burden of constantly learning new technology so they can fully explore the possibilities of multimedia.

These experimental works are a necessary prelude to possible great art of the future. *Burning the Interface* ignores the fashionable computer games and follows the other tradition of creating changing images, from the poetic to the confrontational, from the spiritual to the materialist. There is the grainy endless journey of Tamas Walizky's *The Forest*, all in restrained black and white; the throbbing music and images of Gary Danner and Elisa Rose's *Station Rose*, and the curiously hand-drawn images of George Legrady's *An anecdotal archive from the Cold War*.

The most engrossing of all is Phillip George and Ralph Wayment's *Mnemonic Notations V*. Click an image and the pattern changes, medieval figures emerge, disappear, shrink or are enlarged, Gregorian chants are heard and then vanish. It is curiously hard to write about the seduction of this piece, except to say that because it was school holidays I had my eight-year-old twins with me, and we took it in turns to play this one work for a full half hour. And even then we had hardly started to explore its possibilities.

## BURNING THE INTERFACE, PHANTASMAGORIA, TWISTED

*Burning the Interface, Phantasmagoria, Museum of Contemporary Art, Twisted: Art for Children, Dinostora, Newtown.*

JOANNA MENDELSSOHN

Because the exhibition is so user-friendly, it seems quite strange that the catalogue is written in deliberately obscure jargon. Somebody should tell the supporters of multimedia art that there is no necessary connection between dense prose and quality.

The continuing debate on the links between mass culture and high art take a slightly different twist in *Phantasmagoria*. The works range from the archaic fantasy of Georges Melies's hand-drawn images for the 1902 movie, *A Voyage to the Moon*, to Tony Ousler's bizarre floating eyes and faces in *Five Worlds (for Georges)*.

The curators, Peter Callas and David Watson, argue that Melies's background in magic both created his fantastic visual approach and led to a particular tradition of independent cinema, free from the constraints of the mass market place. Steven Spielberg would probably dispute this, but the exhibition is in itself so engrossing that there seems no point in carping criticism.

Melies's stills are worth a long look, and the films live again in both videos and screenings. Of the artists whose work is used to support the debate, Toshio Iwai has the most whimsical sense of fun and beauty as he sets up his game of intersecting colours, images, insects and music. This was another one that I was not allowed to leave in a hurry.

School holidays also led me to Newtown's Dinostora, which continues an older tradition of handmade art. *Twisted* creates a fantasy children's bedroom with photo montages by Anne Zahalka as well as curious faces by Hugo Weaving, paintings by Max Cullen, ukeleles by Helen Eager as well as other artists. There is a bizarre curly bed by Macgregor Ross and a funky fish tank by Bernie Leishman, but the full benefit of this show of many small oddities is the way it gives a fresh insight into the complex workings of an inner-city culture where the worlds of visual and performing artists meet in a happy collision.

### IN BRIEF

● Rosemary Madigan at Ray Hughes Gallery combines her classical restraint with pieces of wooden scrap, dissected wooden spoons and other odds and ends to make the most enticing pastel-scrubbed still-life sculptures. There are also tiny coloured paper cut-outs made into collage on the same theme. Unlike her colleague Robert Klippel, who uses accident to turn assorted material into his monumental works, Madigan uses similar materials to make her continuing purpose.

● Sydney's Royal Easter Show is over, but Hyde Park Barracks continues with *Going to the Show?* Images and memories of the Show. As well as the memorabilia, freeze-dried fruit, and the wonderfully evocative posters, there is another argument. Ever since 1822, when the Agricultural Society was founded, its aim was to upgrade stock, to encourage farmers to breed from quality animals and to grow the highest yielding seed. There are certificates and photographs, showbags and woodchoppers, celebrating the country's annual reminder to the city that after they are Babe, most pigs turn to bacon.