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MIXED MEDIA

Media arts centre exhibit marks 25 years

Feb 02, 2008 04:30 AM

COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR
 Simone Jones' and Julian Oliver's "Unprepared Architecture," an interactive exhibit in which a virtual cube is projected onto a screen.

PETER GODDARD

Nothing brought me greater sadness the day I was shipping my ancient Pontiac off to the junkyard than the moment my elbow accidentally hit the down button on the power window, and the window still worked. The car was an immobile wreck. Yet its spirit lived on in that small window motor, still drawing power from the battery, still able to hoist a plate of glass.

I got some of the same buzz watching *Menage*, sculptor Norman T. White's primitive, shoebox-shaped robots creeping unsteadily like mechanical beetles across the ceiling of Interaccess Electronic Media Arts Centre during its 25th anniversary exhibition, "IA25: Mapping a Practice of Media Art."

Fabricated in 1974 – the very first robot made by White in his subsequently distinguished and gizmo-filled career that's still motoring along – *Menage*, in its unyielding way, embodies Interaccess's tenacious spirit in the face of today's bewildering array of alternative art spaces.

In 1983, Interaccess was one of the few places where technology intersected fortuitously with art. Today, there are few art centres where art and technology are *not* interrelated.

"When Interaccess was founded in 1983, our formal name was Toronto Community Videotex," says director Dana Samuel. "In the early '80s, Videotex was *the* cutting edge in video graphics, and two-way communication and as an early precursor to the Web. But we changed our name to Interaccess in the early '90s as a move away from that one technology specificity and to allow more of a free exchange between technologies."

Videotex, a text-only information system, was a huge hit in Europe in the early '80s. The French phone service, France Telecom, gave away computer-like "Minitel" terminals free to encourage Videotex use. But in early 1984 Apple Inc. released its first Macintosh computer to launch us all toward cyberspace. So who needed robots where there were avatars?

But maybe now's the time the question is reversed. Who wants digital art in cyberspace when real tech-based art has the immediacy of being in real space?

Lorena Salome's *untitled (solenoids)* (2005), a fan-shaped fibrous trellis of rust-red wires disappearing into a computer housed in a floor mounting, is arresting and entirely beautiful, like some idiosyncratically shaped musical instrument. (Think zither.)

With its row of 15 tiny solenoid valves housed together under Plexiglas – each valve houses a energy-converting coil – *untitled* responds to the presence of people in the room with sharp, clicking noises like so many disturbed brass chickadees. To Samuel,

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AT THE GALLERIES

Any newcomer to the short, succinct and silent film collages by T. J. Wilcox might assume they're all about film editing finesse and technique.

(A Wilcox collection under the name "**How to Explain the Ephemeral and Tenuous Character of Life to Children**" is showing tonight at 8 at CineCycle, 129 Spadina Ave., \$5).

The assumption would be right, of course – at least, to a degree.

Despite the domestic nature of the materials used – old Super 8 footage, vintage video, stills and film transferred to 16 mm – the New York artist is a genius at mediating the radically different textures inherent in each medium. Imagine what might result if Hollywood supereditor Walter Murch got to play with your home movies and prized snapshots and you'll

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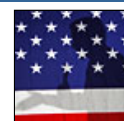
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Salome's piece defines both the gallery's mission. "It has this industrial feeling," she says, "yet it's extremely contemporary and is driven by open-source software."

Galen Scorer's *Network Touch* (2007) involves two individuals separated only by a small curtain who watch as their filmed images meet on the large screen they're facing – the dating game with a webcam and projector. *Unprepared Architecture* (2007), by Simone Jones, an artist influenced by White, and Julian Oliver connects simple game-playing with virtual architectural design.

So the feeling around Interaccess, these days, 150 members strong, is that things are evolving to its liking. Its ongoing practice of connecting old technologies to new ones is making its presence felt now more so than ever with a good many younger artists rejecting any total subservience to computer-based methodologies and cyber art.

"Even this term, 'new media' is contested because 'new media' is never really new," says Samuel. "With us it's finding potential in the old. How many times a year does Apple come up with something new? So are people throwing away their old iPods? If they are, artists are taking them and hacking them."

"IA25: Mapping a practice of Media Art" is at Interaccess Media Arts Centre, 9 Ossington Ave., until March. 8

pgoddard@thestar.ca

have some idea of the skill and sophistication of Wilcox's approach.

Yet even more central to Wilcox's practice is the understanding of the varied ways in which each different film form reinvents the narrative.

Garlands 1-6 (2003-2005) consists of six film mini-collections, each with a number of different vignettes explored in a variety of ways that seamlessly relate to one another.

One of the *Garlands* includes a visit to three favourite sites where a woman named Ann – one of the narrator's "four parents" – wants her ashes scattered; the morbid story of Ortino, a Romanov daughter's pet French bulldog buried along with members of the Russian royal family following their July 16, 1917, assassination by revolutionaries; and, last, a snippet of crude animation.

Entire epic-length feature films are buried in Wilcox's visual short stories. For example, another *Garland* brings together Chopin and other famous figures who lived and died on Paris's ritzy Place Vendôme.

Yet the filmmaker edits it into something that last as long as it takes to read a postcard.

Peter Goddard



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