

# reviews

## Festival

### The SIGGRAPH 2003 Art Gallery: Balancing the Technological Ethos

Review By Dena Elisabeth Eber

*CG03: The Art of SIGGRAPH 2003* is an exhibition that embodies the rich spirit of artistic truth and expression through digital technologies. Although there are valid cautions concerning the mix of art and the technological ethos, *CG03* is evidence that artists can balance technology with meaning without having technology dominate them or their ideas. Jeanne Randolph coined the term technological ethos [Randolph 91], or an ideology that includes a worldview that is productive and meaningful for many instances, especially industry and science. In a recent presentation at the Banff New Media Institute [Randolph03], Randolph explained that the technological ethos includes an ethic of "getting the job done," which, as she pointed out, is appropriate for non-cultural work. It does not, however, include the same ethics and meaning that artmaking embodies. In the context of art and science collaborations, Randolph explained that those working from the philosophical stance of the technological ethos might not understand that shaping culture is not necessarily a job; rather, it is about creating meaning. Art, which she includes in cultural work, is inherently about meaning and ethics. She claimed that when an artist enters into collaboration with those who hold to the technological ethos, she puts meaning and ethics into jeopardy. She further argued that technology can seduce an artist, and in so doing, can inhibit creativity, ethics, and meaning and contribute to exploitation.

I propose that those artists who use contemporary digital technology are in a way collaborating with others who have created it and are making a choice to do cultural work within the realm of the technological ethos. I believe that, in a time characterized by our society's obsession with technology, Randolph's concerns about seduction and the loss of meaning in such collaborations are compelling; however, they do not have to apply. Instead, many artists who make works using digital technology bend the medium so it works to serve the artistic ethics of truth, meaning, and expressive ideas. The works in the SIGGRAPH

2003 art exhibition are lucid examples of how artists can balance, if not overcome the technological ethos to create lush, aesthetically pleasing, and meaningful works that explore ideas such as the self, culture, politics, ethics, and the effect of digital technology on art and society. According to the chair of *CG03* Michael Wright,

"...[the works represent] artists' ideas, thoughts, and truths, reflecting the layered, non-linear, pluralistic nature of our times..." [Wright03]. The exhibition contains an astonishing 189 works including sculpture, two-dimensional pieces, digital video and animation, as well as six critical essays. After 30 years of SIGGRAPH annual conferences, the 2003 art gallery returns to the roots of computer graphics with a focus on animation and video, print, and sculpture, thus emphasizing artistic expression that transcends the underlying technology.

The artists in the SIGGRAPH 2003 exhibition directly challenge the technological ethos to address truth, aesthetics, meaning, and ethics. Works by Quintin Gonzalez, Dorothy Krause, Tina Bell Vance, Celeste Joy Greer (et al.), and Joon Y. Lee, to name a few, twist and reconfigure technology in ways that equalize any negative residue that a technically obsessed culture might leave on expressive artworks. Quintin Gonzalez's *Ghost Of Time* (Figure 1) is a narrative series of images that show movement through the marking of surface kinetics. His abstraction of the human form evokes mysticism that builds a connection between the abstracted digital representation of humans and the sacred. The blurred faces appear ominous yet approachable and their implied movements evoke the equally contradictory emotions of fear and curiosity. The faces seem to flow from frame to frame, creating a formal balance of color and design. The work includes natural and digital samplings that the artist uses to create a new meaning played out through the interaction between the machine and the artist. According to Gonzalez,



Figure 1  
Quintin Gonzalez  
*Ghost Of Time*



Figure 2  
Krause  
*Strapped,*  
*Vengeance Is Mine*

"This new meaning of digital technology's function is one where the machine serves an esoteric, spiritual, and often an irrational purpose." Perhaps the machine influenced the work, however, it is the interplay between Gonzalez and the computer that creates the artists' final imagery. He harnesses the narrative language that technology is capable of and presents it as a digital aesthetic.

Dorothy Krause's sculptural works (Figure 2) also play a part in defining a digital aesthetic, however, hers is more directly part of the larger art continuum. In the near future, as Ann Spalter [Spalter03] predicts, digital arts will be embedded in much of what we do artistically to the point of making it almost invisible. Krause's work grows from the tradition of her formal training as a painter and her natural inclination towards collage. She uses simple materials such as plaster, tar, wax, and pigment along with contemporary technology to create works that are timeless and evoke emotions such as hope, fear, and immortality. Although not literal, her work directs the viewer to look beyond the initial impression for hidden truth. *Vengeance Is Mine* is an accordion book that leads the viewer down a narrative path of symbolism and meaning. *Strapped* is a rich mixed media image that pictures two feminine faces next to one another, thus setting up possibilities for the viewer to contemplate the relationship between two people or see them as sides to a single self. In the end, her work evokes individual responses that carry meaning void of technical overindulgence.

Like Krause, Tina Bell Vance makes works that visibly extend established media into the digital realm. Vance's work appears both painterly and photographic at once and in effect, challenges traditional forms. More importantly, she uses digital technology to direct these new forms into meaningful work that comments on personal and political issues. With her works in CG03, *Still Life With Hands*, *Still Life With Foot*, and *Still Life With Torso* (Figure 3), Vance calls into question politics associated with the body. For example, what are the implications of body dismemberment? What could the erosion of a body imply? Although decaying, these eroding

body parts are quite beautiful and, pictured next to succulent fruits, posed in a way that references yet redefines the traditional still life. Perhaps this is a commentary about age or decay and the beauty in the process. All these notions touch on issues as complex as the role of the body in technology or as simple as the beauty of decay. In showing work that evokes such ideas, Vance addresses ethical issues that are key to the artist's role in our society. Although facilitated by technology, her work serves and helps define and reflect our culture. At the same time, it is the technology that feeds some of the issues she raises, thus it acts as meaningful capital in the flow of creative thought.

Just as digital technology has extended and fed sculptural and image-based media, it has also impacted time-based media. Although work based in time goes back to the beginning of human artistic expression, digital processes have added to this kind of art, thus broadening the possibilities in media such as video, film, animation, and in interactivity. The apparent ease of using such technology has seduced many people, but artists making meaningful and aesthetically rich art have thankfully prevailed. One example from the CG03 gallery is Celeste Joy Greer's, Nicole Ruby's, and Mark Yamamoto's digital video *I Statements* (Figure 4), which is a piece about pain and the cycles associated with it. The artists use the word 'I' to make the viewer think about the individual pain of the speaker. The use of this kind of micro-introspection invites the viewers to go into themselves to then emerge with some kind of meaningful connection with the artist. The artists strive to speak to each person and make a unique connection. The act of connecting becomes universal in that no viewer emerges untouched. This is part of the core of art, and computer graphics technology can enable it. In making the video, there were moments that were too personal for the artist to communicate in front of her collaborators. In their place, the camera stood collecting the information, preparing it for digital manipulation that would make the segment palatable. The digital processing enabled the artists to work with raw emotion that they could manipulate and translate into a form that others could enter. The work is a 30-minute "stream of consciousness" expression of pain that was distilled down from hours of

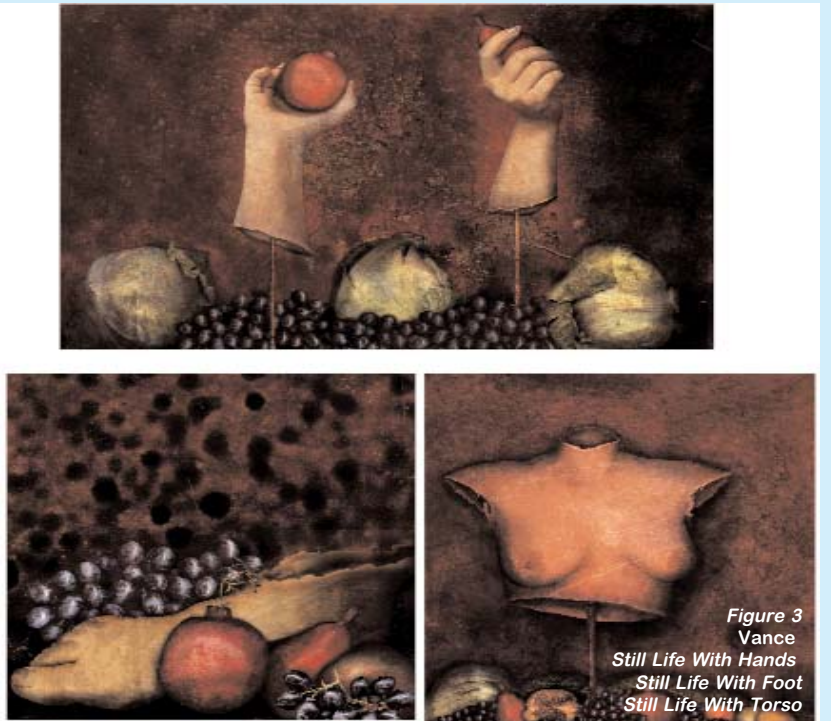


Figure 3  
Vance  
*Still Life With Hands*  
*Still Life With Foot*  
*Still Life With Torso*



Figure 4  
Greer, Ruby,  
Yamamoto

I statements

footage and then stitched together to form a poignant work about grief. Rather than directing and overwhelming the work, digital technology made possible the transformation of raw emotion into a work of art. The idea of processing emotion through technology and ending with art that embodies mediated emotive intensity speaks to the current and future possibilities of human co-existence with technology and the balance that we can enforce with the technological ethos. In addition to processing already existing forms of media, such as film and video, computer graphics technology provides a way for artists to make digital animations that are wholly created within the space of the computer, minus a few scanned textures. When artists are not mimicking film or other existing media, these animations often create works that are unique in look and offer a new sense of reality. We have come to think of film as reality yet it is in fact only one form of it. Perhaps, as Lev Manovich suggests [Manovich96], the different reality that the digital medium yields is one that is over-real, or hyper-real. Computer graphics technology is now capable of giving us more information than we can process, certainly different from the reality that we have come to know from traditional film and photography. This intriguing transformation can be technologically seductive to the point of technical obesity, and there are certainly plenty of Hollywood fiascos that support this thesis. However, serious artists are playing with this new form of reality to create works that, as I have shown with other digital works from the SIGGRAPH 03 exhibition, embrace the values of art.

Joon Y. Lee employs the hyper-real quality of computer graphics technology to shock the audience in his digital animation *Butterfly* (Figure 5). The piece starts off innocently, if not cliché, with a solemn girl who is cheered by a passing butterfly.

As the insect interacts with her she is pulled into its beauty and learns to trust and follow it. Intentionally or not, the butterfly leads the girl to a landmine where she meets her death. The work is oozing with political irony and implications. Some questions include, "What political body could the butterfly represent?," "Where is

this taking place?," "Who planted the landmine and why?," to name a few. The artist uses the hyper-real nature of digital animation to bring the audience into a pleasing and overly sappy world only to shock them into political reality. The altered reality of the digital medium is an optimal way for artists to suggest a new way of seeing things, thus taking a part in defining our culture. As such, the works in *CG03: The Art of SIGGRAPH 2003* play a part in characterizing the digital aesthetic, one that brings along with it the traditional art values of ethics and meaning. After all, art includes a role in defining culture, one that is inherent to art regardless of the medium.

In *The Language of New Media*, Manovich [Manovich01] challenges us to help fully define the expressive possibilities and attributes of digital and new technologies. This will force artists to probe technology and in some ways make commentary about it, which should not to be confused with the technological ethos. It is good to be cautious and to heed the temptation to let the obsession with technology take over the 'truth' in art, or defin-

ing culture. As evidenced by the work in the SIGGRAPH 03 art exhibition, there are many artists who have managed to work the technology in their favor and who have kept overindulgence in it at bay to create rich and meaningful works of art.

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Figure 5  
Joon Y. Lee  
*Butterfly*