Scanners

Looking for the artistry in "The Computer in the Studio"

by Cate McQuaid

**"THE COMPUTER IN THE STUDIO."
At the DeCordova Museum through
November 27.**

Is it too late or too early for "The Computer in the Studio," an exhibit curated by Nick Capasso at the DeCordova Museum? On the one hand, some of the artists use the computer as easily as a paintbrush — and they make art that has got to be good for more complicated reasons than jazzy technique. On the other, there are a few artists here still pushing the boundaries. In the end, it's these visionaries who belong in this show, and not the scanner surfers.

Anybody who can get his hands on a scanner can manipulate images. It's fun, it's fast, it's easy — but it takes rigorous intelligence and vision to turn it into art. And there are artists here who use scanners to their advantage. Photographer Olivia Parker's "Toys and Games" series is cutting and funny; the artist scanned some of her own photos and other objects to create images that have a photographic reality and a surrealist edge. *Mister Johnston's Pull Toy* shows a camel cut off at the knees and balanced on old wheels from a toy coach. He's got a television embedded in his belly and an antenna projecting from his hump. The eerie authenticity and conjunction of eras and cultures make for an odd toy indeed.

Angela Perkins slices up her ripe fruit and vegetables and plops them on her scanner, then tweaks the image to her liking. The result, her *Interiors* series, is lovely for its simplicity. Her strawberry is nearly magenta, with little veins of white shooting through it toward the glowing white portion at the base of the stem; the vague outline recalls a person with hands raised in prayer or agony. The image is also wet, pink, and tender, distinctly sexual, and as alluring to the mouth, tongue, and teeth as a ripe strawberry can be.

What I miss about laser-printed images is texture. Dorothy Simpson Krause prints (from an ink-jet printer) straight onto the canvas, but the images still have a seamless perfection to them — inconsistent with their subject matter, which is the yellowing pages of antique books overlaid with ghostly figures like pained characters springing forth from the pages.

Hugh O'Donnell's enormous *Cascade*, a digital painting that doesn't borrow from any earlier images but is simply a grand abstract work created entirely on a computer, doesn't need any more texture than it has. The sheets of paper it's printed on arc out gently from the wall; they're covered with pixillated swipes of earthy color, checkers overlaid with stripes to the left, a great peaceful lake of buttery yellow and gray to the right. It's a bold, exciting mural.

Works like *Cascade* and Joan Shafran's *Sometimes Never Could* really give legs to "The Computer in the Studio," because they could not have been made without a computer. Shafran's piece, which she calls a "presentation poem," is a narrative flutter of words and diagrams making their way across the screen of a Macintosh powerbook. Reading a poem in which the words actually move and collide brings an entirely new, kinetic dimension to poetry.

Computers can add the elements of time and breadth to art that is traditionally spatial. Both Doug Kornfeld and the duo of Daniel Spikel and Hazen Reed catalogue computer-generated video images you can call up at will. Spikel and Reed's *Dream Wheel* has been set off in a blue-lit side room, where you can sit down in front of a glass sphere — *i.e.*, a crystal ball — and gaze into the computer monitor inside. There you'll find a listing of dream topics; click on your favorite and you'll see a digitized video of somebody recalling a dream. You can even record your own. It's a lovely concept; you feel as if you were adding your patch of fabric to an enormous quilt of dreams. The presentation, however, is pure hokum.

Kornfeld has a similar collection of digitized people talking about their body images. But the far more impressive piece of his work is *101*, an installation of three mosaics made from 24,000 gold and black tiles, each an inch square and sporting the international symbol for man or woman. Kornfeld has distorted the black silhouettes to fit an array of body types, and he's created three big panels with them — a man, made with little man tiles, a woman, and in the center a skull made up with both.

Looking at some of the works in "The Computer in the Studio," you're apt to think of the computer as just another pencil, making art about racism and relationships and the environment — and who needs an exhibit to spotlight that? Then you find Kornfeld and Spikel and Reed hinting at where the computer could take us, even if they can't bring us there yet. ❏

(A companion exhibit curated by Brian Wallace and including artists Emily Cheng, Greg Garvey, Steve Gildea, Tom Krepcio, Frank Ladd, Susan LeVan, Ron Rizzi, Richard Rosenblum, Deanna Sokolin, Jed Speare, and Janet Zweig is up at the Computer Museum through November 27.)