

AVENUE

Questions & Artists

Unfolding frames

Between the rise of the video iPod and the decline in theatre screenings due to fears of piracy, the connection between cinema and film projection is becoming ever more tenuous. Yet there was a time when projection was a fresh, avant-garde art technique, when Ektachrome slide carousels were fetishized much as Samsung flat-panel LCDs are today. Now, a massive survey of Canadian projection art in Toronto shows that the medium of film and slide projection can still generate magic. Even more important, it raises questions about how we create and consume media today. Here Leah Sandals uses another old-school technology — fibre-optic telephone — to ask curator Barbara Fischer about the show.

Q How long did it take this show to come together?

A It's funny, this exhibition started about 20 years ago. At that time, there was a sense that projection-based installation was coming to the fore in a big way in Canada. It was apparent at Aurora borealis, the first big Montreal Biennale, in 1985. At that point I made an application to the Canada Council to do a show, and got it, but when I shifted to a different gallery I couldn't take the funding with me. In the end, it was a two-year project, once I was able to secure the space at four University of Toronto galleries.

Q Are Canadian artists unusually into projection-based art because they spend more time in darkness throughout the year? Or is it part of a global trend?

A Internationally, use of the medium has become incredibly intense. So much so that at the 2003 Venice Biennale people were starting to get exasperated by it because it was room after room of video projection. Even by the end of the '90s, really, it was clear that most artists were in post-studio-production mode and were music or video or cinema artists in some way.

Q You've tried to make an argument in this show that Canadian

projection art, although part of a wider trend, is distinctive. How is it different?

A Most international film and video work is narrative, dealing with shifts in time. I realized recently that the work here was much more spatial and more self-conscious about the aspects that make up cinema. It could be self-conscious in a structural sense, as in Michael Snow's *Two Sides to Every Story*, when he films a scene from two sides. Or it could be self-conscious in a baroque sense, like in Janet Cardiff and G.B. Miller's *Muriel Lake Incident*, where you get to occupy two differently produced environments, one audio and one cinematic.

Q Why this self-reflexivity?

A To me, this self-consciousness has to do with a Canadian intellectual tradition where there has always been a strong interest in media studies via scholars like Marshall McLuhan. There's an acute awareness of being on the receiving end of images, both in academia and in art.

Q Speaking about self-consciousness, Nathalie Melikian's *Science Fiction* points out how projection can make things that are textually ridiculous — like watching a chase scene through several galaxies, say

— seem compelling and plausible. Why do you think that is?

A Well, mainstream film has picked up a bit on the ridiculousness of plot lines. But we can get consumed by cinema visually and aurally, by the way the narrative unfolds and the way the camera gives us luscious vistas. We can completely forget where we are.

Q In an iPod-saturated world, is the death of cinema, like the death of painting, overrated?

A On the one hand, there's a death, and on the other hand, there's an intensification of what's possible. The technologies of reproduction and creation are ubiquitous now. Everyone can download, anyone can make their own movies. Ubiquitousness has freed us from the preciousness of cinema and reproducibility has allowed us to mess with it. Now anyone can use techniques like appropriation, editing, plucking and recombining, image swapping, reversing and playing with narrative.

With digital coming to the fore, we see, even in mainstream movies like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, very conceptual strategies, things you would see in '60s video art, like shifts of scale and longer meditative shots. There's a certain surrealism of imagery — and the idea that you can make any reality whatsoever. These amazing scenarios certainly wouldn't be the death of cinema. It could be the beginning of something unforeseen, something rich.

■ Projections continues to June 17 at four University of Toronto galleries: the Doris McCarthy Gallery, Blackwood Gallery, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and the University of Toronto Art Centre. Visit www.utoronto.ca/gallery for details.

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