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Culture

Show stretches limit of digital art

Michael H. Hodges / The Detroit News

Quick: Define "digital art."

Still working on it?

Those at a loss for words might want to check out "Spatial Effects: New Digital Arts," an illuminating show on the computerized arts, opening at the Elaine L. Jacob Gallery on Friday evening and running through April 3.

At its broadest, of course, almost any work of art that involved a computer somewhere falls under the rubric "digital."

The six individuals in this Wayne State University group show approach the frontier of art and computing from very different directions, but collectively they represent what Wayne State digital-arts professor and show curator Bang Geul Han calls some of the best "up-and-coming" digital artists from around the country.

Bottom line? These works are quirkier and more fun than you might suspect.

With "In the Line of Sight," Fabian Winkler and Daniel Sauter, from West Lafayette, Ind., and Chicago, respectively, mounted 100 flashlights on 100 microphone stands in a work that, Han says, refers both to the ubiquitous nature of electronic surveillance in the post-9/11 world as well and the explosive quality of viral media.

A computer governs this "flashlight matrix," itself reacting to film footage of a dancer, of all things, which the computer analyzes and studiously tries to re-create with mixed success. The result is an ever-changing constellation of flashlight beams on the darkened ceiling.

"It's quite ambiguous but quite pretty," Han says. "But if you go around and face the flashlights -- they're at all different angles -- it's like being in a press conference, with all these lights flashing. It's overwhelming."

By contrast, Chicago artist Sabrina Raaf's "Icelandic Rifts" is a four-part installation, with a highly sculptural robot that both reacts to the presence of an onlooker (little radio towers send out audible signals), and magnetically manipulates pools of "ferro fluid" -- tiny bits of iron suspended in a small pool of water -- to create ever-morphing patterns.

R2-D2 or C-3PO they're not, but these robotic modules nonetheless interact with their environment in creature-like ways, and -- along with the rest of this inventive show -- give some indication of where the universe is presently expanding.

Other artists on display include Tiffany Sum from Los Angeles, Robert Ransick from New York City and Joseph Scheer from Alfred, N.Y.

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