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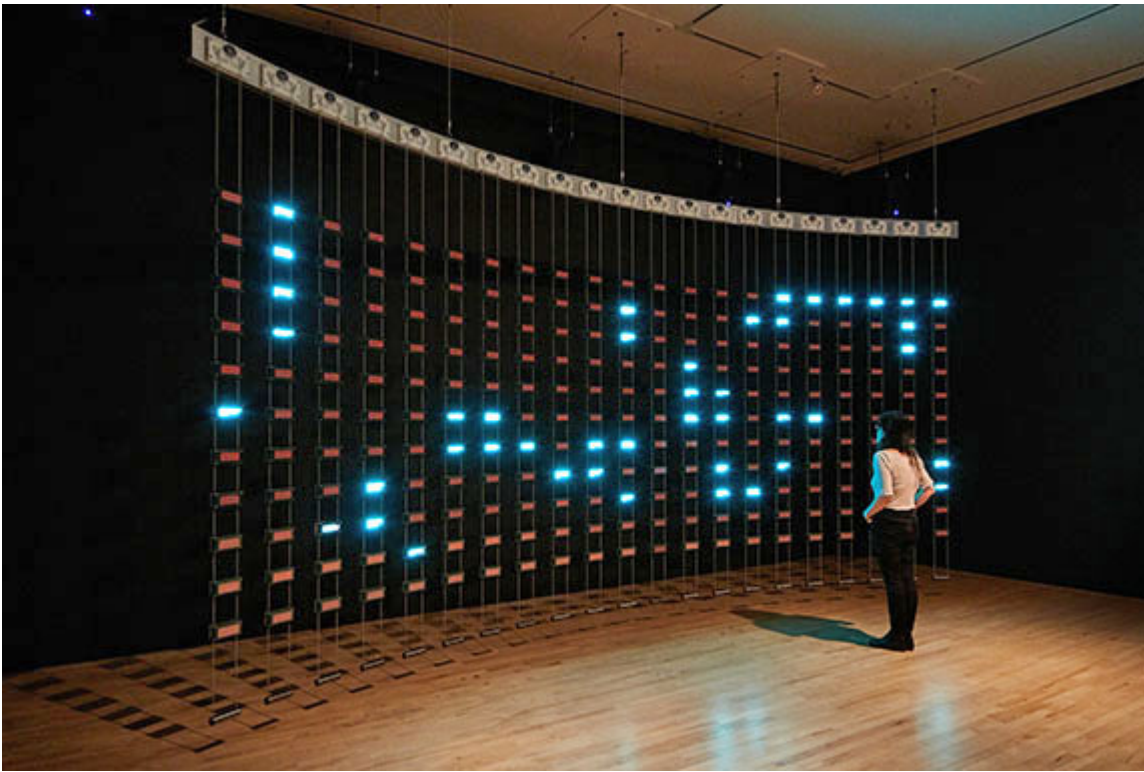
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Almost Human: Digital Art @ San José Museum of Art

Posted on 31 December 2019.

by **Renny Pritikin**



Ben Rubin and Mark Hansen, *Listening Post*, 2002-2006, Screen modules on support beam, connective wire, 8 audio speakers and software, 233 x 146 x 31 inches

The most provocative point of view—often articulated by self-described young “creatives” in Silicon Valley—is that within their lifetimes, the fine art of the past, especially painting, will increasingly be seen as quaint relics of the past. *Almost Human: Digital Art from the Permanent Collection* does not address that point of view, but it does argue convincingly for the power and importance of digital forms and their centrality for the art of the 21st century. It also goes a long way toward discounting the frequently heard complaint that digital, video and internet- derived art is socially isolating: many of the works in this exhibition are politically engaged, and others are deeply humanistic.

I have long maintained, since first seeing Ben Rubin’s and Mark Hansen’s *Listening Post* (2002-2006) more than a decade ago, that it was the first masterpiece of digital and internet-based art. Viewing it again here confirms that impression. The success of the piece is based to a



Tony Oursler, *Slip*, 2003, Fiberglass sculpture, Sony VPL CS5 projector, DVD player, speaker
43 x 35 x 15 in.

considerable extent on ancient technology—the theatrical combination of an audience immersed in darkness, music and the power of the human voice (albeit synthesized in this case). In a gallery with minimal lighting, chairs are placed facing a bank of hundreds of small LED displays that form text streams in formal patterns. Sometimes the text is in lower case, sometimes it's capitalized. Sometimes the text is read by synthesized voices, sometimes it is silent, and sometimes it is accompanied by spare piano music. There are around a dozen "scenes" in this "play." Originally the language was uploaded live from chat rooms, but now it is selected from a database. Most of the text and voices describe lonely people seeking companionship; what is merely touching in small doses becomes an overwhelming engagement with other human beings reaching out for contact, all around us but unknown. We hear names, we hear sentences starting with "I like." It is impossible not to be moved at the elegance and simplicity of this work and how it captures the most emotional and vulnerable aspects of our lives without melodrama or sentiment. The use of language in art has never been employed more powerfully.

Tony Oursler has been mining similar territory for many years in video sculptures in which tiny moving images, usually of talking heads, are projected onto objects. Unlike the work of Rubin and Hansen, which issues pleas for connection, Oursler's videos, made possible by miniature projectors, spew internal monologues at their most angry, resentful and unpleasant. It's an embodiment of the devil on our shoulder whispering things in our ear, the opposite of our better angels. With *Slip* (2003), he projects an image of his eyes at either end of a giant mouth that stands upright on the floor in a distended, green, toothy, reverse "S". His voice is a nasal, whiny litany of complaint. Sometimes the images are as distorted as the emotions conveyed. The work is creepy, nearly unbearable and bleakly hilarious.

Kathryn Wade, the San Jose Museum's talented young curator, has played her most exquisite chip right at the entrance to the exhibition. It's a large video monitor with a 3D computer animation by Andrea Ackerman, titled *Rose Breathing* (2003). The artist has altered a rose's



Andrea Ackerman, *Rose Breathing*, 2003, 3-D computer animation, stereo sound, projector, 34-second continuous loop, variable size

image to give the illusion that it is a hybrid lifeform between plant and animal, expanding like a lung as we hear the sound of respiration. One cannot invoke such a title in Northern California without tacitly referencing the beloved Beat-era San Francisco artist Jay DeFeo and her painting, *The Rose* (1958-66), one of the great American artworks of the 20th century. Ackerman's work is a showstopper, but it is also handy in this discussion of digital art to illustrate the difference between objects that reflect light (paintings) and those that emit light. That distinction is admittedly subtle, but it's critical to how the mind, body and eye receive images: passively or assertively. DeFeo's work epitomizes the excess and body-centeredness of much of the work of the 1950s, while Ackerman's embodies the more optical and restrained nature of artists' digital re-representation of the world in the 21st century. In both cases, I can only stop and stare.

Alan Rath's digital and robotic sculptures are often misunderstood as addressing the ironies surrounding the digital representation of the body. He was the first artist to store images on ROM. The first works of his that came to prominence featured small CRT screens displaying shifty eyeballs, contorted faces and gesticulating hands, usually his wife's. It is a testament to Rath's indifference to image content that, because he had to display *something*, he usually opted for a nearby source. Rath's real interest, however, lies in the capacity of digital work to

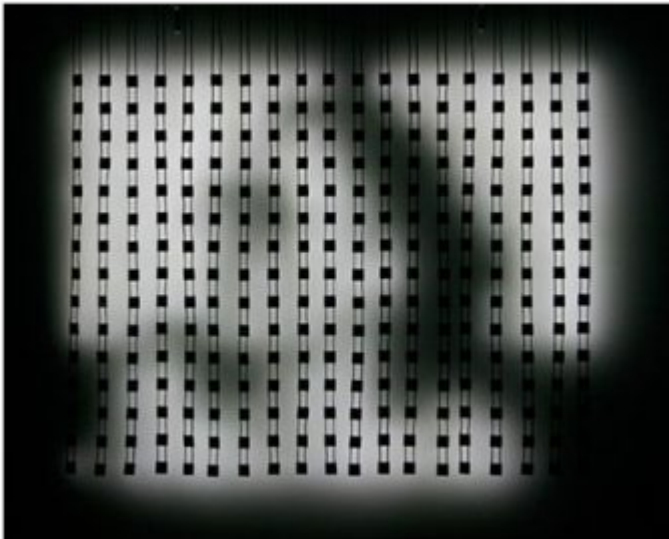
create miraculous systems. Trained as an engineer, he seeks to demonstrate the beauty of integrated design, packaging hardware and software in the most minimal, efficient and streamlined form. He also seeks to deflate high art conceits and not take himself too seriously. Thus, in robotic works like *Absolutely* (2012), he utilizes peacock feathers that wave to visitors like a depraved mechanical Auntie Mame.



Alan Rath, *Info Glut II*, 1997, 50 x 50 x 18 inches

Jim Campbell is best known for creating *Day for Night*, the 360-degree video work atop the Salesforce Tower in San Francisco. It may well be the most significant urban public art commission since the Eiffel Tower if indeed it becomes a visual sign for the city. Here, he's represented by works from the 1990s in rotation with others from the first decade of this century. The earlier pieces are autobiographical, dealing with family, memory and portraiture. The more recent work, the product of research into visual perception, challenges our ability to apprehend images as they pass into near-illegibility. So instead of packing pixels more densely, Campbell asked what would happen if they were spread out further and further? At what point can the brain no longer synthesize an image? Campbell, by problematizing his source imagery, discovered that visual cognition can be achieved at levels far lower than previously imagined. Two such works, *Home Movies 300-3* (2006) and *Wave Modulation and Variation* (2003), demonstrate that the moment of recognition — when ill-defined moving images become identifiable — is as rewarding an aesthetic experience as any offered by contemporary art. As with the work of Rath, Campbell's content — street traffic, breaking waves, birds in flight — isn't nearly as important as the discovery that we can piece together the world from seemingly incoherent fragments.

Jennifer Steinkamp's work is, like Ackerman's, pastoral, silent and haunted. She traces the

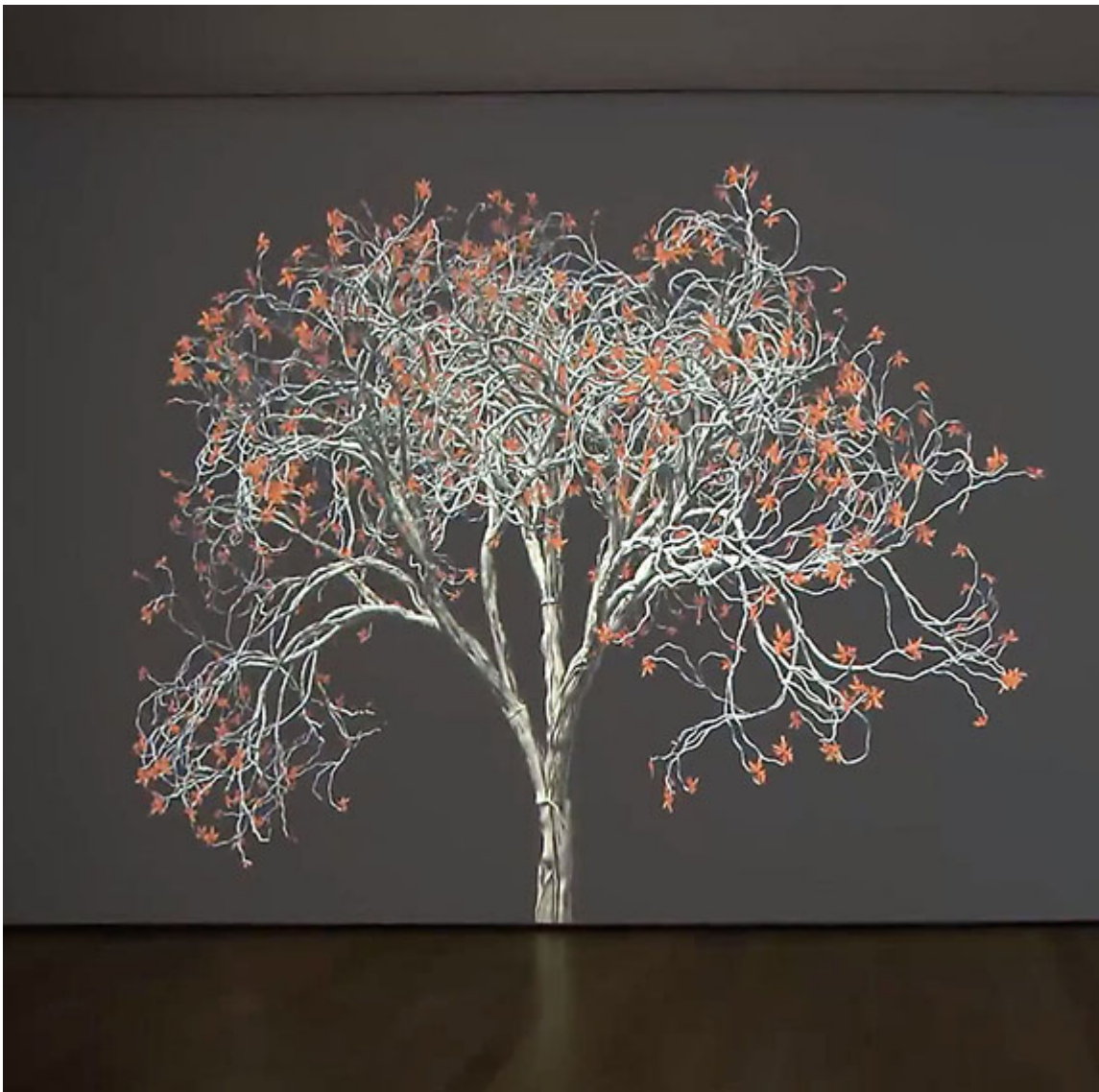


Jim Campbell, *Home Movies 300-3*, 2006, LEDs, custom electronics, wire on metal wall brackets, 51 x 60 x 2"

passage of time through the seasons as seen in wind-blown (computer-created) trees. In *Fly to Mars (no. 1)* (2004), trees can be understood as stand-ins for ourselves, wistfully recounting the story of a life in recurring cycles. The projection is in vivid color, and large— 9 by 9 feet, so that it is easy to immerse yourself in the languid beauty of these arboreal "beings." With no landscape to serve as a backdrop, the artist's rendering of trees is starkly presented as all figure, no ground, like a pop celebrity's portrait.

Diana Thater's 2008 floor installation, *Untitled (Butterfly Videowall #2)* also addresses the gap between nature and technological representation. Five monitors on the floor show closeup images of monarch butterflies going about their business, alongside two fluorescent tubes that approximate the same orange-yellow color as the insects.

Bill Viola is widely respected as one of the leading figures of the second- generation of video artists who took the field from its early days of single-channel black-and-white experimentation to more refined and complex installations. He's since developed a body of work that has been dramatic, even operatic, and has investigated metaphysical experiences of ecstasy, mortality and transcendence. In *Memoria* (2000), he shows a man's face in deliberately low resolution, emerging out of a haze of digital snow, ghostlike until it disappears: a visual estimation of the nature of loss, as people we have loved fade from memory.



Jennifer Steinkamp, *Fly to Mars (no. 1)*, 2004, Digital projection, 168 x 216 inches

Memory (this time as a cautionary tale) is the theme of *Beyond Manzanar* (2000), a joystick-operated video game projected at mural scale by Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand. It displays a recreation of the notorious

WWII desert internment camp for Japanese Americans. Viewers can travel around the camp, read poetry posted on a surrounding fence about the experience of the prisoners, and then enter a digital gallery whose walls carry images of racist headlines published after Pearl Harbor (“Get a Jap Hunting License!”) and more current text-based images relating to the anti-Muslim and anti-Iranian hysteria fomented by politicians today. The hard-edged politics of the work make it an outlier in this exhibition of mostly poetic meditations.

Ian Cheng’s *Emissary Forks for You* (2016) and Jacoby Satterwhite’s *Domestika*, (2017), form another subgroup. Satterwhite’s is an exercise in immersive virtual reality, taking viewers through a world of gay dance clubs, outer space vistas and other scenes of excess. Cheng’s piece was not available on my two trips to the museum. So be aware: Some of the works mentioned in this review, like those by Rath and Campbell, are being displayed in rotation, so they may not be on view when you visit.



Petra Cortright, 6_v211132013, 2015, digital video

Finally, there is Petra Cortright’s small video piece, 6_v211132013 (2015). It displays brightly colored abstract marks on a blue field, which at a distance appears to be a world map, but is really an assemblage of images culled from the internet and transformed into a slowly evolving video painting. It calls to mind the wonderful map-like early paintings of Matthew Ritchie and Julie Mehretu crossed with the interactive video projections of Camille Utterback.

In all, *Almost Human*, consists of some 17 works, making it a sampler, not a survey. Still, it represents nearly every major artist in the field, especially from the Bay Area, including six women. That puts the museum at the forefront of two trends: the ascendance of digital art and the rise of women in a field that has historically shunned them. Both are achievements to be applauded.

About the author:

Renny Pritikin retired in December 2018 after almost five years as the chief curator at The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco. Prior to that, he was the director of the Richard Nelson Gallery at UC Davis and the founding chief curator at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts beginning in 1992. For 11 years, he was also a senior adjunct professor at California College of the Arts, where he taught in the graduate program in Curatorial Practice. Pritikin has given lecture tours in museums in Japan as a guest of the State Department, and in New Zealand as a Fulbright Scholar, and visited Israel as a Koret Israel Prize winner. He is working on a memoir of his experiences in the arts from 1979 to 2018.



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1. *Richard Waldo* says:
[January 1, 2020 at 11:59 AM](#)

Totally in agreement on “Listening Post” as being a major work, and for me, as for you, a masterpiece of digital art. When you first realize that the words captured on the tiles are not the artists words but those of anonymous unknown individuals, spread across the world, (and, in the original version, I imagined being sampled in the moment): different nationalities, different races, different cultures, but all speaking of similar situations, similar emotions, there is a deep feeling of connection – rarely achieved in any art work of any genre. Thanks for the review. I hadn’t realized that “Listening Post” was back in town.

[Reply](#)



2. *Naomie Kremer* says:
[January 1, 2020 at 9:37 AM](#)

Wonderful review. Definitely makes me want to see the show.

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