Computer World

WHAT DEVELOPING trend appears most evident after a recent traipse through Chelsea's rapidly expanding gallery district? Among the homages to old minimalists, the hyping of the requisite BAOM (British Artist of the Month, pronounced like the English *bum*) and the predictable forays into feckless youth culture, there is a trio of exhibitions that call attention to the proliferating role of computers in the art world.
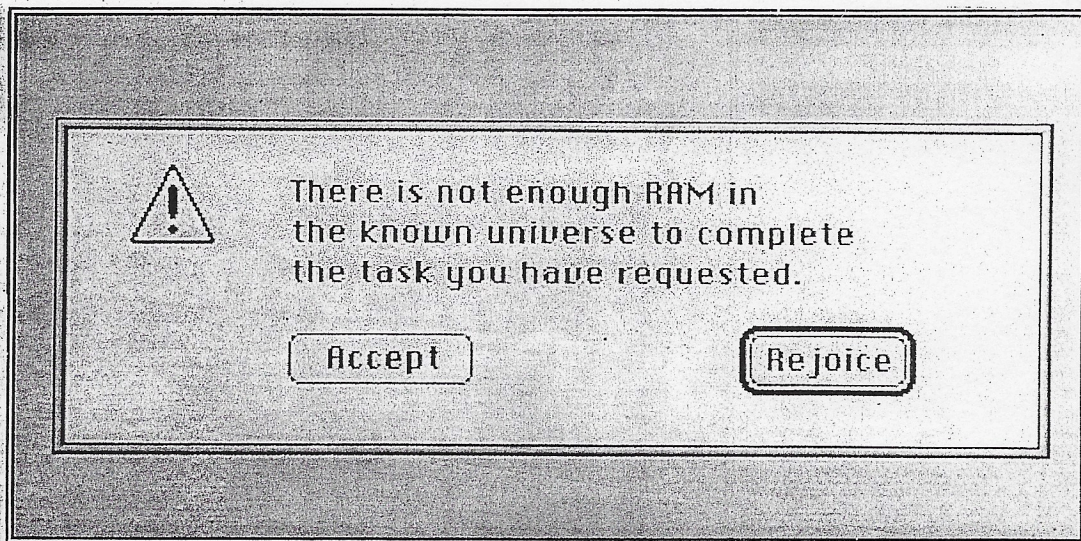
Not, certainly, a movement of any kind, the ongoing, expanding use of digital technologies by visual artists answers to a command implicit in the most optimistic part of conceptual art's conflicted legacy. Conceptualism, in its freewheeling, tradition-shattering 60s heyday, widely propagated the notion that artists should be encouraged to use any and all materials available to communicate their ideas. The art world has never been the same since.

Starting with Nam June Paik's use of early video technology to tape his friends' nocturnal lucubrations at the *Cafe a Go Go*, sophisticated technology has come to be used to confect work both simple and complex, producing results as stunningly elaborate as they can be staggeringly banal. Take Bill Viola's meta-modernist digital video installations, chock-full of cutting-edge humanism and high-tech gadgetry; consider, then, the endlessly recombinant, achingly dull, imagery produced by Paik himself. No two works could be any more different, though the media employed appear, on the face of it, to be very much the same.

In the 60s, artist John Baldessari uttered a particularly on-target phrase about video that has come to sound especially prescient when dealing with state-of-the-art artmaking of all sorts. One day, he said, a new generation of artists will use the new medium with the ease of a pencil. On the evidence, that day may have already come for digitally inspired art. But in the fast-paced, breakneck world of art and technology, today's hippest techno-installation might turn into a hybrid of yesterday's op art and Pong video game tomorrow. So, without further ado, let us now examine, prod and praise Chelsea's most recent digitalized artistic offerings.

"The reason I am painting this way is that I want to be a machine" a robotically provocative Andy Warhol told an innocent *ARTNews* writer in November of 1963. Nearly 40 years later, Texas-born painter Jeff Elrod seconds Warhol's vacuous if graphically compelling emotion. In his second substantial exhibition at Pat Hearn Gallery in as many years (he had a two-person show with Lisa Ruyter in 1999), Elrod displays eight large acrylic, computer-generated paintings. Derived, each and every one of them, from doodles the artist made with what is unironically called "primitive" computer software, Elrod's designs are color-printed, transferred to a slide format, projected onto primed canvas, tape-masked and then finally rolled with several layers of broad, solid color.

The resulting work is table-flat, as abstract as it is abstracted from human touch, cool as an iceberg at a World's Fair in July and, at some basic level, frictionless rather than warming from elemental frisson. Recently described as the sort of painting a young Henri Matisse might have produced had he access to a Macintosh computer rather than scissors and paste, Elrod's canvases place the hand at a digital remove that is light-years away from Matisse's Mediterranean shears (an implement the Frenchman resorted to only when he was too *old* and blind to paint) and the radical simplicity of what critics called the latter's "genius of omission."

Elrod's small contribution to painting thus far, instead, is one of presence: the presence of a cut-and-paste line not unlike that traced by an Etch A Sketch. Rather than eschewing touch, the real appeal of Elrod's canvases trades on an unmistakably "technological touch" derived from a drawing program just a half-decade out of date. One of the first among a quickly growing company of abstract painters who use computers—most prominent of whom is Monique Prieto, whose work Elrod's cannot help but resemble—Elrod has committed his work to an admirable porousness.

Open to the effects of technology on the collective consciousness, Elrod reflects and vastly amplifies an immediately recognizable surface effect. But a canvas like *Analogue Painting*, a digitalized Brancusi bird made of spiky white, gray and black color planes, so clearly recalls Microsoft's old Paintbrush program that a problem arises. What if Elrod's work remains tied to an obsolete technological product in a universe of such constantly eclipsing wares? Where will it be then?

Cristinerose Gallery this month presents a lively if slightly uneven exhibition of computerized drawings. Featuring seven artists getting at issues of line and form through magic tools like laptops, word processing programs and scanners, the show, titled "Cyber Drawings," touches upon a widespread ambivalence many artists have with regard to new media. To critique or not critique, that is the question. For the participants of "Cyber Drawings," the impulse to ironically deconstruct exists alongside the fascination of finding skewed use for their spanking new cybertools.

"Creatively misusing" the computer, as the gallery release reads, are artists like Marsha Cottrell, who converts the raw material of digital punctuation marks into dense, vaguely architectonic abstractions that resemble schematized cityscapes. Tom Moody's laser-print *Headshots* of middlebrow media babes are given subtle, almost imperceptible digital makeovers by means of handheld, mouse-activated editing (the girls have their standard pug noses shortened, their already full lips fleshed out and their eyebrows and eyes brought together). Sculptor Jack Risley combines drawing and scanned-in sketches to output a wall full of drawings in the pastel palette of a recycled Rome bus map. Elliott Green presents a "sketch movie" in a pedestal-mounted aluminum box, its LCD screen crackling with cartoony lines. And Claire Corey presents groovy, swirling colorscape abstractions produced with the aid of high-end graphic programs.

Most eye-fetchingly attractive among the bunch, Corey's printouts on watercolor paper alternately give away much of this show's production as chiefly experimental and not yet 100 percent ready for primetime. Sharing the funhouse-mirror look of Karen Davie's paintings, Corey's ink-and-paper works look like a modest if very handsome footnote to the painter's better-known book of images.

Consider, on the other hand, Perry Hoberman, an old cybersalt if there ever was one. Seriously busy since the early 1980s doing work with advanced technologies, Hoberman is a godfather to younger generations of artists working in film and digital media. Starting first with complex cinematic installations, he graduated by 1986 to creating work with 3-D computer graphics. His latest exhibition at his longtime gallery, Postmasters, is a trio of interactive multimedia installations designed chiefly to query mounting expectations surrounding our increasingly unexamined digital environment.

Convinced that our virtual prostheses have become arguably more lively than ourselves, Hoberman builds genuinely funny, super-functional installations that set both utility and the simple Luddite rejection of technological utility on their heads. His first installation, *The Center for Cultural Opportunity*, for example, guides the mere follower toward an endless take-a-number queue that promises, among other things, "that all artists will be supported and treasured as indispensable pillars of a free and forward-thinking society." Another installation, *Timetable*, looks very much like a giant, sundial-shaped video game. Here, 12 spinning dials allow for the participation of a dozen folks in achieving or thwarting useless, hallucinatory non-tasks, such as controlling the rate at which the images of skiing ATM machines spit out endless streams of cash receipts.

Hoberman's third and largest installation, *Cathartic User Interface*, is without a doubt the piece de resistance of the exhibition. A game-board wall covered with recycled PC keyboards and a sliding ramp from a carney toss-and-win game, *Interface* invites participants to hurl soft Koosh balls at it, triggering all manner of unexpected sounds, logos and multimedia projections. A chance to get even after years of faceless computer tyranny, participants get out their frustrations, shooting down familiar computer icons (the mouse, horn and Microsoft icons, for example) and computer-literate acronyms (CPU, RAM and others) as if at an arcade. Hit a moving target, and an announcement appears, such as: "You have no new mail. You have no friends. You have no life." Whack another, and the Big Brotherish head of the piece's author becomes the screen's biggest target.

Loads of adolescent fun with ambiguous adult messages built in, Hoberman's installations invite reflection way after the vengeful adrenaline settles down to normal levels. Like a seasoned, unclipped hacker, Hoberman chips away at artificial computer consciousness, levering by means of engaged satire accretions of digital artifice from the Game Boy-addled imagination. Anybody for a round of Donkey Kong?

"Jeff Elrod: New Paintings," through Feb. 26 at Pat Hearn Gallery, 530 W. 22nd St. (betw. 10th & 11th Aves.), 727-7366.
"Cyber Drawings," through Feb. 12 at Cristinerose Gallery, 529 W. 20th St. (betw. 10th & 11th Aves.), 206-0297.
"Perry Hoberman," through Feb. 19, Postmasters, 459 W. 19th St. (betw. 9th & 10th Aves.), 727-3323.

There is not enough RAM in the known universe to complete the task you have requested.

Accept | Rejoice

PERRY HOBERMAN, *CATHARTIC USER INTERFACE*, 1995/2000
Setting both technological utility and the Luddite rejection of it on their heads.