

ARTSCENE™

The Monthly Digest to Art in Southern California

CONTINUING AND RECOMMENDED

"Cyborg Manifesto or the Joy of Artifice"

The Laguna Art Museum, Orange County

by Bill Lasarow

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The hybridizing taking-off point of this gathering of twenty-six artists was inspired by author Donna Haraway. Its title, *Cyborg Manifesto, or the Joy of Artifice*, is directly lifted from her essay that advocates mental ambiguity as an adaptive tool. But this is less an organizing principle than a starting point from which works of art were chosen. The array of visual types are placed in the more obvious service of the fusion--or at least intimate relationship between--the human and the mechanical.

The feelings of horror connected to our fear of sacrificing some core element of our humanity to a soulless device is a key component in some of these selections. Tony Oursler's *Come to Me* is a video self-portrait projected onto a pole-mounted fiberglass skull that literally beckons you. But the tragic creature conveys that he knows that something is dreadfully wrong. Carlee Fernandez' *Peter* is a taxidermed rabbit with a viewing lens in which you can see the late furball's memory of having been chain-sawed to bloody death by a monster. Well, a suburban housewife really, but for a few moments you may be compelled to

suspend disbelief. Then in Alan Rath's *Couple* a man and woman silently speak, facing each other across the abyss of the two TV screens they occupy. The electronic tubes stand in convincingly for each conversant's viscerae.

The opposite notion, that we have now entered a wonderful world of neatly integrated body circuitry, has no champions here. But there is some gorgeous work that strikes at least a less polarizing tone. Ken Gonzales-Day grafts details of the body's surface and details within lyrically irregular grids. The eye moves between the impulse to integrate these pieces into a new creature, and using a given rectangular "peep hole" to identify the particular body part or more. This exercise in tweaking the imagination is more fascinating than terrifying, and certainly more tiring than tiresome. Talk about old-fashioned, egg tempera is the medium of choice in Paul Paiement's tasty Hybrids, such as a fly and screw. There is a Sisyphusian quality in this backtracking to a medium dominant before the advent of oil paint over half a millenium ago. Why paint what could be imaged with a pair of photographs and the right program? That seems to be

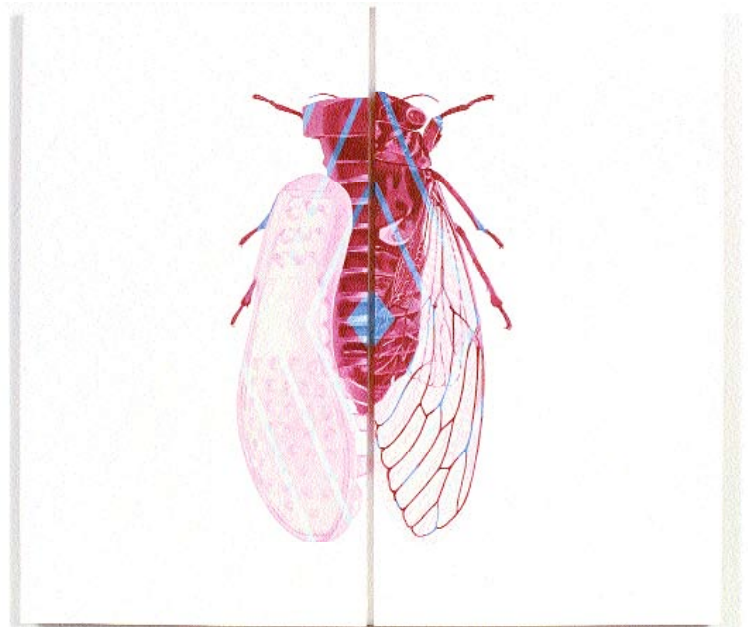
precisely the point.

The digital drawings of Jon Haddock draw on a computer gaming model for their point of view. These are not escapist fantasies, but real and familiar historical events that he depicts. You are compelled to compare the image presented, such as the assassination of Martin Luther King, to the recalled image held in memory. To the degree Haddock goes for this type of highly charged, often unpleasant association, the images undermine the initial expectation for entertainment, morphing it into a new query on factual or historical narrative.

The distinction between the serious and the amusing is cut even more narrowly in S.E. Barnett's *Mary Shelley's Daughter*, which allows viewers to "build" their own figure by changing the images on any of eight monitors. The reference to Shelley's early 19th-century literary creation, the Frankenstein monster, a proto-cyborg constructed of dead body parts and brought to life with the then new force of electricity, is direct. But

the charm of changing the eight visual components to construct new wholes is akin to children's flip books that in some ways touch the same impulse in all of us. This take also brings us to the realm of plastic surgery, the options we have to alter ourselves physically, to manipulate personal identity, while often overlooking who we really are.

The notion that modern technology has opened the door to expanded plasticity of personal identity is no longer a new one. In art, Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp created images of cyborg creatures more than eighty years ago. And the powerful whiff of pessimism surrounding the whole issue remains surprisingly strong. But the feeling that it is here with us, and here to stay, is more palpable. Like the computer-generated imaginary innards of H Shahani's *Flesh Pink* series of photographs that seem to wind us through shiny, plastic veins and stomachs, the means of envisioning are powerful enough to enable great clarity.



Paul Paiement, Hybrids B-Tettigia Screwni, egg tempera on panel, 25 1/2 x 23", 1999. Courtesy Remba Gallery.

But the increased clarity hardly erases our unease.