



Computer medium an aesthetic challenge

By HENRY SUM

Seems like more and more people are tossing away their 39¢ Bics and using word processors for their personal correspondence. These very same people end up mailing out these very mechanical-looking letters and apologizing for their impersonal appearance.

The art world is being similarly invaded by automation and some of the results can be witnessed at the recent opening of *Computer Works* by Gerald Hushlak at the Art Gallery or York University (AGYU) until February 1.

"I would not call him an apologist but a great enthusiast, plunging in where angels fear to tread and using the computer as a new artistic tool," AGYU's curator Elizabeth McLuhan.

"Dad (Marshall McLuhan) used to say that with instantaneous communications everybody becomes instant travellers and conveyers of messages."

Perhaps Gerald Hushlak is just such an apparition. Certainly the rapidity in which he can generate images with the computer would justify the definition. The individual photo-images on view in this show took only 30 seconds each to create!

These richly colored and textured images are assembled on long strips of photographic paper which look like they've just rolled off the processor at Eddie Black's. These images however do not resemble family snapshots. Rather, they look like they were taken in the transporter room of the USS Enterprise during a warp-11 melt down.

Silhouettes of nude female figures seem to be disintegrating into cosmic particles reminiscent of that old TV series. Solared images of landscapes, churches and trees bombard the retina with a cascade of undulating, multifaceted colors. Hot molten oranges careen against brazen golden browns in one image, while gushy ochers, and cool, cool limes

collide in another.

The computer can create numerous multiple images in a single frame or squash the contents vertically, horizontally, or diagonally to any desired ratio.

"You can't look at it and pretend you're getting a pointillist painting," McLuhan said. "You're not, but certainly you're getting lessons in optics. I think the computer has to be put in perspective like the typewriter, or photography in general. It's just another device which adds to our perception of all the formal elements that go into a work of art."

Hushlak's photo-images were first "digitized" on a CRT (cathode ray tube) which resembles a television with four times the resolution. These images were then converted into the hard copy we see mounted in the gallery. Although these images are flat, software has been developed to allow the user to rotate images on the CRT and analyse 3-D objects from different angles. The Mona Lisa or the Shroud of Turin for instance could be programmed into the computer and their hypothetical profiles displayed on the screen.

Hushlak's other series of work in this show was "plotted" and involved "batch processing."

To make drawings with a computer, all information fed into it has to be coded and ordered in a definable, understandable, rational way," Hushlak wrote in the catalogue accompanying his show.

The passion, sensuality and hand-crafted finish we generally associate with art is here replaced with mechanical logistics and push-button control.

These drawings resemble linear design exercises a novice art student would produce with a ruling pen or rapidograph nib. In another way they remind one of the spirograph toy children play with to create string-like patterns. Row upon row of thin, colored pen lines cross a

sample page on a diagonal slant shaping out a rectangle here, a circle or oval there. All are repeatedly executed in unnerving machine-like precision. As a result this series suffers from a clinical sterility that the accompanying photo series just manages to elude.

Hushlak's photo series, despite its exceptional effects, is unsettling for all the questions this brave new work stimulates. If these images can be generated with the alarming speed and infinite variety they boast, isn't the artist's inner vision and spirit overwhelmed and somehow jaded by all this glut of endless imagery? Hasn't disenchantment already crept into Hushlak's paintings, two of which are on view in this show?

Although their iconography resembles the photo series, for some reason they seem to lack the photograph's vigor and spontaneity. Consequently they hang like dated albatrosses next to an awesome and unpredictable new art medium.

"Being stuck as we are in our contemporary sensibility," McLuhan said, "we end up trying to use a new tool to create old effects. What it does is end up making you dissatisfied with the old effects. You instantly outdate yourself and make your aesthetics obsolete in the process. This is what I think is disturbing in looking at this."

Can the artist's inspiration truly be envisioned by "digitizing" and "plotting" the way old fashioned drawing and painting were relied on to do? Are not Hushlak's works still in the decorative, experimental stages? Just what happens when the computer becomes the artist's palate?

The answer to these and countless other questions from artist and programmer alike might be answered at a public lecture Hushlak will give next Wednesday, January 16 in Room 312 of the Fine Arts Building from 12:30 to 2:00 p.m.



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