

# HIGH TECH ART

BY KAY BURNS



*To Touch*, a 1994 installation artwork by Lethbridge artist Janet Cardiff.

*“The sound of crickets. A country road. A tall man with large eyes and long curly black hair is dancing by himself. He’s dressed in a white gown and his thin arms are held in front of him as if he were holding an invisible partner. He’s backlit by the lights of a parked car. A woman in a red dress sits on the hood with her legs crossed, smoking a cigarette.”*

These words are a sound element in Janet Cardiff’s 1994 installation artwork, *To Touch*. In *To Touch*, the gallery is empty except for a single, rough-hewn table in the middle of the room. The table, when touched, fills the gallery space with sound—male and female voices and miscellaneous audio effects that allude to another place, another time, through a mysterious and disjointed narrative.

Lethbridge artist Cardiff who, with partner George Bures Miller, won the prestigious Venice Biennale for 2001, is one of several Alberta artists using technology to create installation art. Unlike the usual gallery experience where a painting, for example, is perceived as an isolated object, an “installation” invites the entire gallery to become the artwork. Cardiff, Miller and other media artists push the viewer into more active physical involvement with the work, placing the viewer in a vulnerable position—that of immersed spectator, even participant.

We may wonder about this desire of artists

to impose a sense of discomfort upon viewers. Some of us, as the audience, are wary of technical gadgetry and fear the loss of “control” this type of art demands. Yet, for many artists exploring technology and art, a relationship with the technical is second nature. They have grown up perceiving it as an extension of themselves, a medium that demands examination and remanipulation. Technology surrounds us, we all interact with it to varying degrees day to day. These artists push that omnipresence into new experiences for the viewer.

The 20th century was witness to tremendous technological evolution. Art reflects its time, so familiar forms are making way for the new and revolutionary. Video, audio and new-media artists worldwide are generating innovative works described by the umbrella term “media arts.” A vital element within media arts is time, giving rise to the term “time-based art,” which includes video, audio, computer interactivity and/or com-



*Higher the Lower* by Shauna Kennedy. By collaborating, Kennedy was able to create a work that would never have been possible in isolation.

puter controlled sensory environments. Like a theatrical performance or a symphony concert, these require a period of time to experience. In these new works, the medium provides form and content, presenting an experience precluded by other art forms because it is as much about the medium as the meaning.

Here in Alberta, several artists are beginning to forge their own paths in the media arts. In Calgary, artist-run production facilities such as EMMEDIA and the Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers lend equipment and are vital hubs for artists who wish to experiment with time-based media. Shauna Kennedy is actively involved with EMMEDIA. A viewer of her installation *Higher the Lower* moves into a darkened space filled with areas of light and motion. Two video projectors in opposite corners of the room play loops of dance sequences choreographed and performed by dancer Kyrsten Blair. The dancer appears as a kind of human/arboreal hybrid, with tree-like branches and roots, and the sequence is paced to give a sense of slow methodical rhythm and frenetic, energetic motion. As well, three projections of animated images, composed of cut-out silhouettes spinning in front of a light, create the illusion of more motion loops—like an adaptation of zoetrope techniques in early motion studies.

Although a project of this nature is always costly to create, alternatives to expensive techniques do exist. Kennedy, a thrift shop enthusiast, uses recycled materials wherever possible—her projection screens were made from old water-bed vinyl, a product she experimented with during one of EMMEDIA's monthly "media jams." Fan motors were used to create the spinning poles for the silhouettes. Non-reflective foil tunnels attached to light bulbs created the spotlights. The video projectors were loaned by The New Gallery and EMMEDIA.

Collaboration is important to Kennedy. She discovered its merits during her years in film and video production and continues that approach in her installation work. With the expertise of others—dancer, compos-

er/musician, technicians and other artists—Kennedy was able to create a work that would never have been possible in isolation.

Two of Calgary's senior artists, Alan Dunning, academic head of Alberta College of Art & Design's media arts and digital technologies program, and University of Calgary professor Paul Woodrow have worked collaboratively since 1995. Their Einstein's Brain Project is an ongoing body of research and art produced in conjunction with a third collaborator, Dr. Morley Hollenberg. Hollenberg, a professor in U of C's pharmacology department, works with receptors, signal transduction, growth factors and hormone action; all play a part in the Einstein project. They have engaged input from other experts, including engineer and software designer Dr. Hideaki Kuzuoka, other software technicians and consultants from various medical institutes.

The Einstein's Brain Project examines the nature of consciousness through the confluence of science, culture, technology and art. One artwork coming out of the Einstein research, called *The Furnace*, was part of the 1998 Alberta biennial celebration exhibitions at the Edmonton Art Gallery and Glenbow Museum. The installation has the viewer enter the space of the brain by walking through fire. The wall of fire is an extraordinary illusion: video footage of flames is projected onto an enormous screen (4m x 6m) made up of strips of heavy vinyl. To enter, the viewer must push through the projection screen strips and then through a second wall of vinyl strips before approaching a table in the centre of the room. On the table, a plastic, life-size medical model head is covered with pressure-sensitive pads and light and sound sensors that trigger changing imagery on the projection wall.

By representing the body and brain metaphorically and physically, the piece alludes at the same time to neurological pathways and historical notions. The 19th century science of phrenology attempted to explore the brain's special functions, including a supposed connection between mental faculties and organs and the notion that mental faculties and traits of character are shown on the skull. Dunning and Woodrow's use of contemporary neurological science and digital representation criticizes outdated explanations of the workings of the brain along with concomitant cultural and social stereotyping.

A more recent work of Dunning and Woodrow, *The Madhouse*, consists of an anatomical model of a human body. As the viewer approaches, the "interactive biological interface" enables a computer system to connect with the participant's own biological features, such as skin temperature, electrical resistance, pulse rate, speech and motion.

All of this, of course, costs money, and a lot of it. Technically complex, the projects require the participation of professional specialists, the creation of software and the rental/purchase of electronic equipment.

Dunning and Woodrow's most recent project cost them "somewhere close to \$100,000," a figure many artists couldn't begin to imagine spending. They feel fortunate in having obtained funding from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, research funding from the University of Calgary and Alberta College of Art & Design as well as collaborative support from The Banff Centre. The rest has come out of their own pockets. Because such projects are time-consuming, the collaborators have spread their costs over several years, a strategy demanding a serious long-term commitment.

LETHBRIDGE has become a centre of exciting media arts activity. Why? The community is relatively small and its artists mutually supportive. Janet Cardiff, George Bures Miller, David Hoffos, Michael Campbell and Janice Rahn have influenced one another and continue to influence the developing artists in the community. And Lethbridge has some extraordinary institutions.

The Southern Alberta Art Gallery (SAAG) has played a huge role in the Lethbridge art scene. A highly regarded gallery in this country, SAAG takes seriously its mandate "to foster the work of contemporary visual artists who challenge the boundaries of their disciplines and advance their work in a larger public realm." Joan Stebbins has been curator since 1985. Her policy is to show an artist's work only "once in a career." This necessitates careful decisions about an artist's development and makes for a dynamic and diverse exhibition program. Lethbridge artists and students get to see a continual program of leading-edge contemporary art, including new-media-based work, within their community.

Arts organizations in Lethbridge support one another. SAAG, Trianon Gallery and Gallery Potemkin co-ordinate opening events to occur on the same evening at successive times, thereby ensuring a good turnout for all venues. David Hoffos says this about Lethbridge: "Unlike some bigger cities where there is sometimes competition and jealousy among artists, here there is a free exchange of ideas and labour. I've helped Janet and George with their projects, and younger artists freely offer me their time on my projects...realizing that it is a chance to learn. What goes around, comes around."

The University of Lethbridge has played a central role. Cardiff, whose own work and university teaching through her 12-year residence in Lethbridge had an enormous influence on many regional artists, was herself first drawn to the university by the presence of Jeff Spalding. He was an associate professor and director/curator of the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, who, according to Cardiff, "loved difference." Michael Campbell and Janice Rahn, having known Cardiff and Miller for many years, moved to Lethbridge from Ontario four years ago to teach at the university.

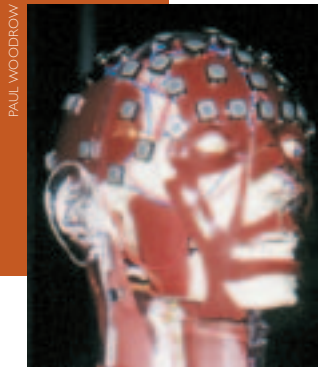
Excited by Miller's video editing system, Campbell began to use video technology in his own work. Campbell and Rahn now share their passion for the media arts with their students at the U of L.

Influenced by this stimulating environment, recent U of L graduates Robyn Moody, Denton Fredrickson and Brian McKenna experiment with multidisciplinary time-based works. They have jointly created installation projects. Even during Fredrickson's current absence as he works on his master's degree in Halifax, these three collegial companions produced a collaborative performance in which Fredrickson participated by telephone. Individually, they continue to develop their own studio practices. McKenna, a musician and artist, seeks ways to incorporate both disciplines in his work. Similarly, Fredrickson brings music, film and theatrical elements to his art.

Moody's experiments incorporate performance, video and installation in remarkably witty and innovative ways. His art frequently comments on commercial icons and pop culture through unusual adaptations of "old tech," such as 8-track tape players, 16-mm projectors and typewriters, all set up in pseudo-automated,

Robyn Moody's VR machine makes a tongue-in-cheek comment on our ever-increasing desire for tactile, immersive entertainment.





The Einstein's Brain Project examines the nature of consciousness through the confluence of science, culture, technology and art. *The Furnace* was part of the 1998 Alberta biennial celebration exhibitions at the Edmonton Art Gallery and Glenbow Museum.

*I want to know who you'd be in the best of all possible worlds*, by Michael Campbell, addresses our need to make sense out of nonsense.



David Hoffos's *Another City*. A hallmark of his work is the use of miniature sets and spaces.

interactive environments. In one recent, humorous work—a playful comment on the high tech virtual reality (VR) environment—Moody lined the inside of a lampshade with panoramic photos. The viewer steps onto a platform, places his/her head in the lampshade and then, using a joystick, rotates her/his position to experience the “VR” images in 360 degrees!

Works like these are a comment on our ever-increasing desire for tactile, immersive entertainment. The paradox of high tech art is the use of the technical to criticize the technical—what better way to comment on Western society's fixation than through that very medium? Indeed, every technically based work addresses the role of technology in our lives.

David Hoffos is among the many Lethbridge artists doing technically based work. He came to Lethbridge in 1990 from Calgary to attend the U of L. He hadn't intended to remain in Lethbridge after university, but he stayed, finding it an excellent environment to continue to develop his art. Studio rates and living expenses are cheaper than in larger centres, and there is a dynamic exchange of ideas—a “cross-fertilization” among artists.

Hoffos's installations take the viewer into another world. His work *Another City* is housed behind a dark curtain. One enters the space, waits for eyes to adjust, and soon realizes that, in the dark, couples are kissing. The viewer has unwittingly become voyeur. The embracing couples are video projections. Yet sound, light and motion compel one to explore further. There is a small window. Through the window one sees a constructed model of a futuristic city, complete with

skyscrapers, flying cars and more kissing couples.

Hoffos created *Another City* as an alternative to his previous work, *Catastrophe*, which portrayed the demise and destruction of a city. The horror over, Hoffos delves into an antithetical perspective, now positive and idealistic. Working with old, second-hand television monitors, projector lenses and VCRs, he transforms familiar components to effect magical illusions. His simple technique of using mirrored reflection provides the miniature city with its sense of infinite space, and the ethereal, hologram-like tiny figures in romantic embrace are miniature video projections. The life-size figures in the installation space are disarmingly present, and, even upon close inspection, give the sense of being ghost-like apparitions—credible effects achieved by ingenuity and second-hand consumer equipment.

A hallmark of Hoffos's work is the use of miniature sets and spaces, a technique derived from his interest in film. In fact, miniature components and reconfigured electronic equipment surface frequently in the work of Lethbridge artists. Which came first, who influenced whom, really doesn't matter. They all do it in distinctive, proficient and innovative style, and the phenomenon is just more evidence of artistic “cross-fertilization” in this close community.

Michael Campbell's work *I want to know who you'd be in the best of all possible worlds* consists of small-scale fragments of rooms, recreations of his past studio spaces, complete with video. One three-minute loop shows a canoe burning in the middle of a lake. The disjunction of the co-existing miniature video image and the model-sized objects in lathe and plaster environments forces the viewer to create a mental connection between the two. This work addresses our compulsive need, and indeed our ability, to somehow make sense out of nonsense, to make meaning from disparate things. Another recent Campbell work, *MindReader*, puts a playful twist on the miniature, this time blowing up a single element to three times its size, in effect forcing the viewer into the miniature position. The oversized lawn chair perhaps alludes to the overwhelming banality of suburbia from a child's dwarfed perspective, as the narrative describes the child's fantasy.

Cardiff and Miller too use small scale and they combine it with perspective illusion. Their collaborative works *The Playhouse*, *The Muriel Lake Incident* and *The Paradise Institute* all incorporate miniature theatre environments in which the viewer becomes a member of the audience. The immersion environment offers an alternative reality. Wearing headphones, within the space of these miniature installations, the viewer can suspend disbelief and become a participant, a player, in the fictitious event.

Cardiff and Miller's practice has earned them international recognition. Their work, both individual and collaborative, has been exhibited at some of the most

important contemporary art venues in the world, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate Gallery in London and the Venice Biennale. In an interview published in the 49th Biennale catalogue, their comedic banter reveals a remarkable collaborative dynamic. It's obvious they have a great time working together, which no doubt explains some of their success.

Cardiff and Miller, partners in life and art, also help one another with their individual projects. Together, they adapted binaural recording techniques that resulted in Cardiff's well-known series of audio walks. Wearing headphones and a portable tape player, the viewer follows the artist's voice and footsteps on a journey which commingles reality and fiction. The narrative voice navigates and describes; the ambient sounds at the time of recording intertwine with the actual sounds around the participant as he/she moves. Is that siren part of the recording or is it actually out there now? Are those footsteps behind me or are they on the recording? These disjointed audio elements create disturbing questions and an unusual tour.

Cardiff recently won the coveted International Millennium Prize. *Forty Part Motet*, the winning piece, is an ambitious 40-channel audio installation. In a reworking of Thomas Tallis's *Spem in Alium*, composed in 1575, 40 members of the Salisbury Cathedral Choir were individually recorded through separate microphones. Presented in the Rideau Chapel of the National Gallery of Canada, the installation comprises 40 high-quality speakers arranged in elliptical formation around the room. Fourteen minutes long, the musical piece is repeated indefinitely, so the viewer may enter at any point in the loop. Standing or sitting in the middle of the room, you are treated to a concert that seems performed for you alone. Or you may choose to walk around the room and listen to each voice individually, making the experience strangely intimate, despite the identical, electronic “faces.” Now in the “personal” space of these singers—women, men, boy sopranos—you hear them cough or sputter or clear their throats. Allow yourself the luxury of staying a little longer than the full loop and you will notice that, at the outset, the voices are engaged in preconcert warm-up and conversations. The whole experience is startling, hyper-real.

Media art is, by its very nature, creating a new, active role for the viewer. Interdisciplinary and technical, it is changing the artist's role too—s/he becomes collaborator and conductor of multiple parts into an integrated whole, in which technology is used to explore itself. Whether the actual bits and pieces be state-of-the-art or rejects destined for the landfill, it is the innovative artists who push the limits of their use, creating new forms that address crucial concerns of our time. □

**Kathryn Burns** is a media artist, freelance writer and curator. She is a sessional instructor in interdisciplinary media arts for the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Calgary.