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AROUND THE GALLERIES

Jennifer Steinkamp dazzles at ACME



DIGITAL ANIMATION: Jennifer Steinkamp's "It's a nice day for a white wedding" is a series of computer animated projections currently on view at ACME Gallery.

By Christopher Knight, Times Art Critic
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Jennifer Steinkamp is among the most consistently inventive artists working today. Digital animation has been her medium since the early 1990s, which also makes her an important pioneer.

Still, it's not the sophisticated technology that finally sets Steinkamp's work apart, as her hauntingly beautiful, powerfully elegiac new installation at ACME Gallery attests. For her, a computer equipped with Hollywood special effects software is just a newfangled pencil.

Instead, Steinkamp is next in line as millennial American heir to our two great flower painters, Georgia O'Keeffe in the first half of the last century and Andy Warhol in the second half. Four of her five new video projections develop a theme she has worked on since 2002. Steinkamp infuses these animations with a psychological complexity seemingly born of relentless trauma -- Sept. 11, Iraq, New Orleans, etc.

Wide bands of flowers cascade from the ceiling to the floor, falling in a continuous stream of moving color. Snapdragons, asters, lilies, columbines, mums, jasmine, thistles and many others bob and nod in an unseen breeze. These rainbow-colored flowers have no earthbound roots -- only stems, leaves and ravishing blossoms drifting silently through optical space.

The floral cascades appear to ooze from the razor-sharp juncture of ceiling and wall and then seem to slip into the place where the wall abuts the floor. Steinkamp composes her linear bouquets as acute architectural décor, like postmodern, neo-Victorian wallpaper.

Wedded to the architecture, they evince a sly humor. The show is titled "It's a nice day for a white wedding" -- ideal for this month of June, as well as for the ideal white space of the contemporary art gallery, now reconstructed with unruly streaks of chromatic splendor.

Like the floral cascades, her color palette is similarly banded -- for example, wide vertical stripes subtly emphasizing red flowers next to blue ones, or yellow next to red. The fusion evokes Barnett Newman's carefully divided fields of pure color, and an uncanny cross between Ellsworth Kelly's panel paintings and his flower drawings.

Look closely, though, and sheer artifice is emphasized in plainly unnatural, multicolored flowers that spiral like a Dairy Queen ice cream cone. Flowers used to have highly specific symbolism, and in some societies they still do -- chrysanthemums as longevity in Japan, irises as death in ancient Greece or lilies as purity in Christendom. But Steinkamp's digital daisy chains are not so explicit.

Or, perhaps it is more correct to say that her flowers are frankly American, simultaneously absorbing and neutering those old, clannish meanings. Her floral animations fuse all three primary meanings of decoration -- as ornament, a celebratory gesture and a solemn commemoration.

Electronic wallpaper of raining flowers suggests petals strewn on a sacred path and mournful tributes cast on a grave. Virtually hypnotic, it creates a gentle space for reflection. In this post-Sept. 11 period of death and distraction, their ambiguity feels just right.

So does "Left Humerus," the fifth installation in the gallery's small room. It builds on a pair of earlier works: "Einstein's Dilemma," an interactive meditation on creation and apocalypse installed in 2003 at CalTech's faculty club, and "Oculus Sinister (left eye)," a commission by the Getty Museum for the recently closed exhibition "California Video." (The artist's website, www.jsteinkamp.com, includes an excellent compendium of past work.)

"Left Humerus" is composed from billowing clouds of exploding color projected on adjoining walls. The colors appear to bleed outward from the corner, surging and swelling in great puffs of crimson, gold, blue-green, hot pink and gray.

Part primordial lava flow and part visual "Battle Hymn of the Republic," bursting with a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of pixels rather than steel, the baroque drama pulls you in close to the wall. There the projected swirls evaporate into tiny, immobile squares of glowing colored light.

Steinkamp flips themes traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity in these aggressive explosions and cascading flowers. One is infused with delicate beauty, the other with uncommon power. Both are extraordinary.