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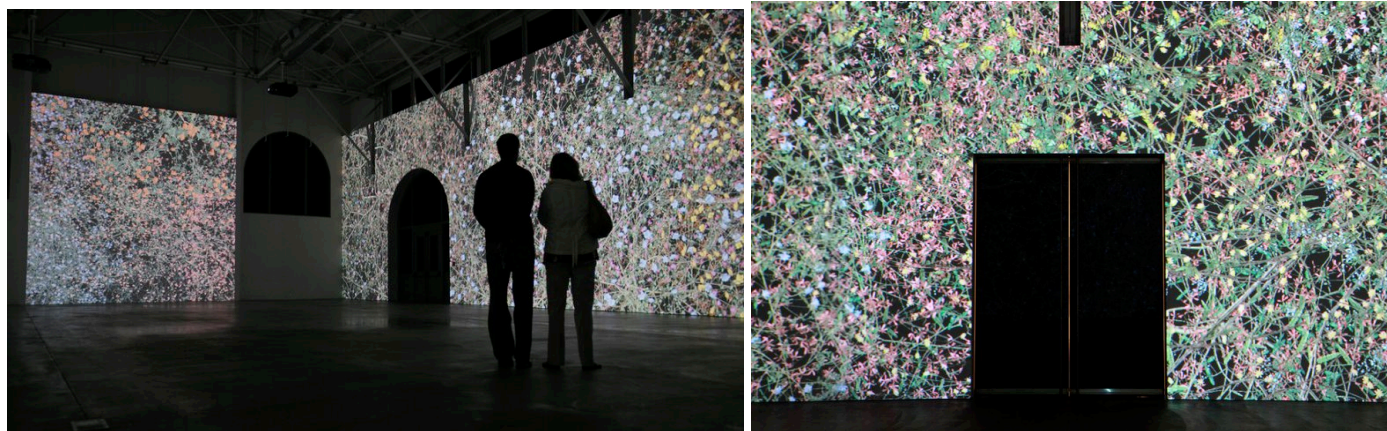
6150 WILSHIRE BLVD., SPACES 1 & 2  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90048  
T 323.857.5942 F 323.857.5864  
WWW.ACMELOSANGELES.COM

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The San Diego  
**Union-Tribune.**

## Video artist Steinkamp's flowery 'Madame Curie' is challenging, and stunning

By James Chute | 8 p.m. March 5, 2011



The Wall Street Journal got it wrong. In an article about how Jennifer Steinkamp's video art had inspired a dress in Narciso Rodriguez's spring collection, the Journal writer said Steinkamp was wearing sweatpants while being interviewed. "Every time a fashion person interviews me, they always talk about what I wear," said a bemused Steinkamp, who the Journal interviewed on the phone while she was in San Diego installing a new work commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. "I said (I was wearing) gym pants, not sweatpants."

There is a difference. "Can you get that right?" she asked, perhaps only half joking.

As someone who works at the cutting edge of digital video technology, Steinkamp appreciates attention to detail. A professor in UCLA's design/media arts department, her work is in the permanent collections of dozens of museums ranging from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to the Istanbul Modern in Turkey.

Her large-scale video pieces can have the effort of "dematerializing architecture," to use her words, and require considerable technological complexity and sophistication. Her most recent work, "Madame Curie," which fills the Jacobs gallery at the Museum of Contemporary Art's downtown space, is her most complex yet. Making two of the cavernous gallery's walls essentially disappear (plus projecting on a third) involves synchronizing seven digital video projectors, multiple computers and tens of thousands of digitized images.

"I had to invent things to make this happen," she said. "I made tools to 'draw' around the doors. I invented a special wire to make all the computers run in sync — I should get it patented, but nobody else would buy it. I wrote code."

Stand in the gallery and your first thought won't be about code. Buds, branches and flowers dance and swirl by as if caught in some strange breeze. The technology disappears and you are left with an experience as old as art itself: fascination and wonderment at the sheer beauty of the images. Apple and chestnut blossoms, daisies, fuchsia, gorse yellow, laburnum, mimosa, passion flowers, wisteria and more float by in mesmerizing succession.

“It turns out Madame Curie was a flower fanatic,” Steinkamp said. “One of her daughters wrote a biography, and even when she was poor and starving she would buy cut flowers. ... These are all flowers mentioned in the biography.”

Many of Steinkamp’s pieces involve natural elements, most typically flowers and trees, and it is those patterns that have attracted fashion designers. Valentino Haute Couture used one of her videos as a runway backdrop for its 2010 spring/summer show. But underneath the flowers in “Madame Curie” is something just slightly unsettling, although if you look long enough, it’s almost unnerving. Perhaps it’s a feeling similar to what Steinkamp would get when she drove down to San Diego on Interstate 5 and would pass the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station set against the backdrop of the Pacific Ocean. “I started thinking about radiation,” she said. “I’m opposed to nuclear power. In fact, I’m scared to death of nuclear power. So in my research I came across Madame Curie. It turns out she’s the first woman to win a Nobel Prize, and she won two. And she discovered two elements, polonium and radium. She had an amazing struggle, and it’s an amazing feminist story.”

The feminist aspect is appealing to Steinkamp, even if it is not overtly evident in her art. “There’s a certain amount of sensuality, from my point of view as a woman, in my work,” she said. “Although I don’t know if that’s a feminist thing, per say. But certainly it’s important to me.”

Steinkamp was born in Denver, lived in Edina, Minn., and remembers being fascinated by animated cartoons, even if she watched them differently than most children. “I’d watch the backgrounds and things,” she said. “Like in Disney films, the water is amazing.” While attending the Art Center College in Pasadena, she saw some of the early work in computer animation, and her path was set. Steinkamp is often described as someone who uses video as a tool similar to the way a painter uses a brush.

Her work is in private collections (including several in San Diego), and video is taking up more and more space in museums and galleries, she’s under no illusion video will ever supplant painting or sculpture. “I’m not an elitist about technology, that would be silly,” said Steinkamp. “I think art includes everything that an artist wants to use to make art.”

*jim.chute@uniontrib.com • visual-art.uniontrib.com*