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The faces of technology

Local and international artists talk digital media in BMoCA's 'flatlander'

By Natalia Bayona

The advent of the computer has changed the world. The global digital network has transformed communication, appropriation and spatial time. And as always, artists are pioneering new visual dialects and using media in their own way.

Ten artists from around the world, including Boulder's own Rebecca DiDomenico and Jeanne Quinn, came together in the production of the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art's (BMoCA) summer exhibit *Flatlander* to show how the flat screen has changed their worldly perspective. Using an array of media, from crowd-sourced videos to online home décor catalogs, artists present works that bring flat imagery into the thirddimension and others that restrain 3-D objects to the 2-D world. Their pieces tell personal stories, speak to injustice, examine cultural norms and experiment with illusion and abstraction in ways often only possible by viewer participation.

Guest curator Patty Ortiz explored this topic last year at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas, in her exhibition *Flatland*, which illustrated how the Internet allows for the sharing of art and ideas between cultures.

While a few of the artists from the show in Texas play a part in *Flatlander*, Ortiz says this year's show focuses on how digital imagery is becoming a new tool for artists. She believes artists have a way of responding to artistic "trends" in a way that makes us think about "something we're missing or not doing."

"In this show, it was really much more about how the flat screen has affected the visual vocabulary and how artists are taking those visual elements and really examining them," Ortiz says.

Each artist's unique perspective on the issue of globalism in *Flatlander* illustrates how the Internet's demand for commonality fails to strip us of our identity.

"I intentionally intended for [Flatlander] to be very diverse and come at [this concept] from lots of different angles," she says.

A major expansion made in the exhibit was the addition of pieces that drew material directly from the Web, she says. Toronto-native Penelope Umbrico is one such artist who reinvented traditional photographs of Western landscapes in her *Range* series. The appropriations reveal how the flat screen disrupts and, ultimately, transforms our relationship with photography. She snapped shots of the photos online with her iPhone and layered blurs and color gradients over mountains. The filters and apps she passed over the pictures are reminiscent of the glitch aesthetic, a modern portrayal of the failings of digital software.

Umbrico's art is a signal that the sacredness of iconic imagery, made famous by American photographers like Ansel Adams, may have disappeared with our ability to manipulate online media. By marking the photos with digital imperfections, she speaks to our desire to reclaim a lost purity in photography.

"Everyone's a photographer, so that kind of idea of the master photographer has gone away," says Mardee Goff, BMoCA's associate curator.

In a similar way, Umbrico and other digital artists distort popular art and images that are mediated by businesses and governments to diversify the mainstream and speak out about consumerist culture.

"I question the idea of the democratization of media, where pre-scripted images, made with tools programmed to function in predetermined ways, claim to foster subjectivity and individuality," Umbrico writes on her personal website.

Man Bartlett, another artist from Philadelphia, contributed work to *Flatlander* that paints a picture of how digital media has changed the way we interact with each other. In his interactive pieces OUTER/UNDER and RAGA/CHAKRA, he holds a mirror up to our habitual use of computerized images, videos and shared music. The wall projection OUTER/UNDER features looped GIFs of oceanic scenes shared online and is backed by ambient noise and recordings of numbers stations, shortwave radio channels over which governments transmitted Morse code.

RAGA/CHAKRA is a 24-hour cycle of audio pieces that combines a diversity of noises, ranging from analog synthesizers to real-time explanations of every-day scenes spoken by volunteers. The audio is presented in six phases, each representing the color and energy of major human chakras.

RAGA/CHAKRA adds layers to the exhibition, Ortiz says.

"To me, it's a whole new trend in the art world for work to now be so... virtual but also abstract in the experiential sense. It doesn't exist until you start participating and listening to it."

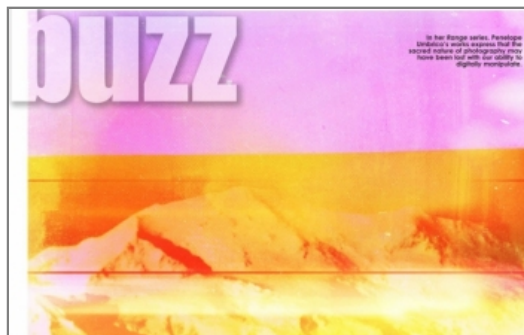
Bartlett's work shows how the ease with which we are able to change digital media leads us to be satisfied and consumed by the capabilities of the Internet. The power of the Internet cannot exist without us and, yet, our modern lifestyles cannot exist without the Internet.

Joel Swanson, director of the University of Colorado Boulder's technology, art and media program, studies how technology changes language and the meaning behind it.

"Today, everyone is just bombarded with media and spectacle 24/7," he says. "So, what I'm seeing a shift in is that artists are becoming more filters in the world than necessarily producers."

In a world where all expression is shared instantaneously, digital artists help to unveil the symbols and messages within media that are important to them. And in doing so, we start to see that the true meaning of an image or a song can never be described by just one person.

Ultimately, the exhibits in *Flatlander* test preconceived notions of the world. An example of this is seen in Spanish artist Carlos Aires' *Disaster* series. He lays laser-cut currencies from around the globe with digital photos of international crises inside that speak to incidences like the shooting at Columbine High, Cuban-American conflicts and Saddam Hussein's rule in



Courtesy of Penelope Umbrico/Mark Moore Gallery

Iraq. Reflections of American ideals and the global prevalence of our culture are seen throughout the collection.

Each frame exposes the important contrast between reality and the often-idealized representations of culture in currency. Ceramicist and associate professor at CU Jeanne Quinn, who contributed her installation "Floating" to the show, thinks Aires' work carries a powerful message.

"You don't think about cutting up currency ... because it has this intrinsic value that you don't wanna lose," she says. "But he's like, 'OK, I'm going to use that to ...construct a kind of meaning.'"

In a similar way, Quinn rebels against traditional convention in bringing twodimensional photographs into threedimensional space with "Floating." She casted white porcelain animations of shapes found in the patterns of photographed 17th-century Italian lace and hung them from BMOCA's ceiling in a semisymmetrical, chaotic design. One reason she is drawn to using lace, she says, is to bring decorative or domestic art into a formal public setting.

"I feel like it's a little bit of a feminist statement," she says, to present something that has always been known to exist in feminine space as "high art."

With "Floating," she also wanted to challenge the idea that sculptures are stationary and utilitarian in design, she adds, by "exploding space in some way."

"I feel like there's also a time component [to the installation] because ... when you enter into the piece with your body and as you move around the piece, it completely changes," she explains, arguing a fourth dimension exists when visitors experience the exhibit.

Indeed, the projection of two-dimensional objects in three-dimensional space is a recurring theme in *Flatlander* that resonates with Ortiz's original vision for the show. Local artist Rebecca DiDomenico's ornamental installation "Emanate" exploits the idea of negative space in a way similar to Quinn's "Floating."

"I think that a flat screen TV tends to take people away from the physicality of conversations. ... But in a lot of ways ... Rebecca's piece [Emanate] particularly brings it back to the very surface," Ortiz says, by moving a normally flat paper map into three-dimensional space.

DiDomenico illustrates the interconnectedness of people who live on opposite sides of the world by connecting rivers and roads from various areas on the world map that normally would be far apart, DiDomenico says. She then cut out the space between traveled pathways, weaving a three-dimensional paper web. Those paths also remind us of the possibilities we may discover on the journeys we take or decide not to take in life, she adds.

In visualizing those ideas, cross-dimensional art could help us develop healthy relationships with each other and with the flat screen. We begin to understand how art catalyzes our social connections when we read into the personal stories of other artists in the exhibition like Jesse Amado, who depicts his relationship with prescription drugs in an entirely virgin wool felt installation. And simply talking about the immense impact digital devices have on our human experience hasn't solved the problem. Goff enjoys the lighthearted nature of *Flatlander* because it's capable of changing that.

"Using really tangible, accessible, colorful ... seemingly light work to have these kinds of conversations was what appealed to us initially," she says. "The response has been so amazingly positive."

ON THE BILL: *Flatlander*. Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, 1750 13th St., Boulder, 303-443-2122. Through September 13.