



Jennifer Steinkamp, *Jimmy Carter*, 2002, DVD projection, 35' x 18' x 14', at the San Jose Museum of Art. (Photo: Robert Wedemeyer v.)

Jennifer Steinkamp at the San Jose Museum of Art

Early fine-art photographers suffered much disrespect at the hands of their art critic contemporaries, who dismissed the new medium as lacking the aura of “real” art. One of the primary reasons was its mechanical nature—its push-button ease and its divorcement from the artist’s hand. And when Kodak introduced the Brownie in the first years of the twentieth century, turning millions of Americans into amateur photographers, it couldn’t have helped.

Digital projection artist Jennifer Steinkamp finds herself at a similar historical juncture. Now that such projection systems are popping up more and more in ordinary homes, it inevitably falls to the artists in her field not just to stay on the cutting edge of the technology, since technology becomes passé faster than anything, but to create works that will hold up over time—that will retain their aura, their power as fine art, ten or fifty or a hundred years from now.

Steinkamp’s earliest pieces in this retrospective exhibition have worn well in many respects; one can still sense her excitement of ten years ago at the idea of channeling computing power in the service of art. She places her projectors low, encouraging viewers to get in front of the bulb and participate in the lively movement of abstract colors and shapes. The preciseness of the pixels and the crispness of the silhouetted bodies on the wall still have the power to entertain and mesmerize, even if some of the projected imagery now seems a little dated, like an old screen saver. *The TV Room* (1998) is the

most architecturally complex of all the works (and a particularly great example of the care with which this beautiful exhibition was installed), with two projected images, one on the far wall and another on three horizontal wall “bars” reaching across the middle of the room. Rather than asking viewers to get up and dance, however, the installation overpowers them; they watch, immobilized, while dripping, shrinking, flowing projected images move up and down, accompanied by an experimental soundtrack whose drone sharpens the surreality of the immersive environment.

Steinkamp’s newer pieces also encourage a prolonged, meditative viewing. Some are reminiscent of recent computer-animated movies; the flowing flowers in *Rapunzel* (2005) recall, for instance, Sulley’s blue fur in *Monsters Inc.*, and the tree in *Eye Catching* (2003) inevitably summons to mind images of Harry Potter’s Whomping Willow. But divorced from all narrative, floating on a black background of empty space, Steinkamp’s plants call on us to invent narratives for them—to ascribe feelings of joy or melancholy or malevolence to their strangely animalistic movements.

The most awesome and beautiful work in the exhibition, *Jimmy Carter* (2003/2006, titled to commemorate his recent Nobel Peace Prize), is a giant two-wall projection of vertical strands of flowers whose movement recalls the slow swaying of an underwater kelp forest. An unseen wind causes them to twist, first at one point and then another; they sag and rise; they seem to move together, then independently. Watching long enough reveals that there are two systems of motion operating simultaneously, and also a whole other layer of green plants behind the flowers, which is sometimes in resonance and other times undulating according to its own unfathomable algorithms. The computations behind the piece are impressive in their own right, but its sheer beauty is what makes it memorable. Viewers might be tempted to want one for their own homes, but the work’s power immediately stifles the wish, humbles the wisher. It transcends its medium to be about something else—respect and humility in the face of nature—and truly achieves an elusive aura that not just any computer animation could pull off.

—Lindsay Westbrook

Jennifer Steinkamp: Immerse Yourself closes October 1 at the San Jose Museum of Art, 110 S. Market St., San Jose.

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