

# San Francisco Chronicle

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## Light beams yield subliminal emotional power



### Kenneth Baker *Galleries*

Our experience of vision wavers between activity and process. Certain artworks help us make that distinction conscious and give it meaning.

Little contemporary art draws us toward the process side more compellingly than the computer-animated light projections of Los Angeles artist Jennifer Steinkamp.

The San Jose Museum of Art has given over its first-floor galleries to 10 works by Steinkamp that make an involving exhibition.

Steinkamp customizes imaging software to produce spectacles that wash over walls and at times over their viewers with hypnotic visual opulence.

The San Jose show includes early works such as "A Sailor's Life Is a Life for Me" (1998), in which gumdrop waves that look hand-drawn ripple endlessly across a wall and down the one adjoining, and recent pieces such as "Rapunzel" (2005), in which tresses of realistic-looking wildflowers dangle upside down as if in a stiff breeze.



**Jennifer Steinkamp:** Projected  
computer animation. Through Oct.  
1. San Jose Museum of Art, 110 S.  
Market St., San Jose. (408) 294-  
2787. [www.sjmusart.org](http://www.sjmusart.org).

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Steinkamp's art occasionally has topical references. A second piece here featuring flowers disturbed by invisible currents she calls "Jimmy Carter," in recognition of the Nobel Peace Prize the former president received while the current one committed to war. The '60s anti-war anthem "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" irresistibly comes to mind.

A double-sided projection above a doorway might look like a reminiscence of acid-rock light shows but for its title. Its abstract explosions of color, under the title "Einstein's Dilemma," recall the great physicist's torment over the new destructive powers to which his discoveries had led.

Opposite "Einstein's Dilemma" plays "Eye-Catching" (2003), a projection depicting a tall, leafless tree that looks as if brightly lighted against a night sky. Every branch of the tree and its trunk writhe with a motion both insinuating and menacing, like something in a fairy-tale forest.

In this piece, Steinkamp exposes the repetitiveness that can make her work pall and exposes the power of an image to distract us from it.

Her "TV Room" may repeat itself, but probably no one could catch it in the act. It features two tiers of projection; one falls on three horizontal baffles that partition the room, a second on the end wall beyond them.

Each projection shows streams of color that break into blobs as they travel like the trickle from a faucet. The streams on the baffles run horizontally, those on the end wall vertically. One thinks more readily of paint tubes disgorging than of TV, especially since primary colors rule.

Steinkamp's best work here — "Einstein's Dilemma," "Eye-Catching" and "Jimmy Carter" — proves itself by a slowly building, almost subliminal emotional power that offsets its mechanical qualities and sends a visitor away shaken, not merely impressed.