

SUNDAY, APRIL 13, 2003

Multimedia exhibit puts man's interaction with world on trial

By Kurt Shaw

TRIBUNE-REVIEW ART CRITIC

For visitors to Pittsburgh Filmmakers' New Gallery in Oakland, stepping into the currently darkened gallery will be a bit like stepping into a slowly moving whirlpool.

On the floor, a video projection of a woman swimming in water rotates as the water moves from relative calm to rippling tide. On the walls, a hundred or so small projected images of aircraft altimeters, swirling toy airplanes and butterflies slowly swirl around the room.

Add to that a multi-layered soundtrack of Antonio Vivaldi's "Winter" concerto from "The Four Seasons" that slowly builds to a crescendo, and the video installation piece "The Trial of Harmony and Invention" will leave most reeling.

It's one of two pieces on display in the gallery by San Francisco artists Jeanne Finley and John Muse.

This piece, one of their most recent, originated with the concept of mixing every single recording of Vivaldi's "Winter" on top of each other and ending them all on their last note.

And, even though it might appear to allude to drowning in an overseas plane crash, Finley says, "The work is more about the balancing act of control and loss thereof ... the effort of constantly 'righting' oneself, only to find one's balance challenged and the necessity to correct in a different direction."

Finley says this is kind of what happened when she and Muse began layering the Vivaldi recordings. Instead of including all of the recordings that they had collected, they ultimately chose to use only 24, "because that sounded best," she says.

As for the imagery in the piece, Finley says, "Both swimming and planes serve as visual counterpoints or references to that life/time relationship of our bodies and minds to the world around us. I know this is a little more abstract, but it isn't about plane crashes; (it's) more about flight."

Since 1989, Finley and Muse have

been using documentary, narrative and experimental forms of filmmaking to produce video and multimedia installations that "explore the relation between the document and the documented, fiction and fact, empathy and irony," the two wrote in their artist statement.

In the other half of the gallery, which is separated by a half-wall, visitors will find an earlier example of their work, "The Adventures of Blacky," from 1998 that does just that.

In the center of that space, which is also dark, a spotlighted wooden chair that has no seat sits askew in a pile of pencil shavings as if sinking into it. On either side of one corner of the room a projection fills each wall. The one on the left is a series of slide projections and the one on the right is a video projection.

The slide projections on the left are all taken from a psychoanalytic test for children from the 1950s that Muse found in a thrift store nearly 15 years ago. A doctor named Gerald Blum devised the test, for which the title is the same as the piece.

The test revolves around a series of illustrated flash cards that feature a cartoon character named Blacky, a young female black dog. The questions in the test focus on Blacky's interactions with her family as illustrated on the cards.

The images on the flash cards are psychologically loaded — Blacky angrily chews her mother's collar, hollers at a toy or imagines that her sister Tippy's tail is about to be severed.

In the video component to the right, a young girl is seen being shown the cards by a female interviewer. The audio component to the piece is of a woman reading

several of the questions that the interviewer is to pose, such as "Here is Blacky with mamma's collar. Why is Blacky doing that to Mamma's collar? How often does Blacky feel like doing this?"

"This piece has much to do with testing and subversion," Finley says. "The relationship of authority and control and the possibility of thwarting that authority when necessary."

In light of the evocative imagery, Finley says the piece "is also about the perversion that can easily arise in a situation that involves testing."

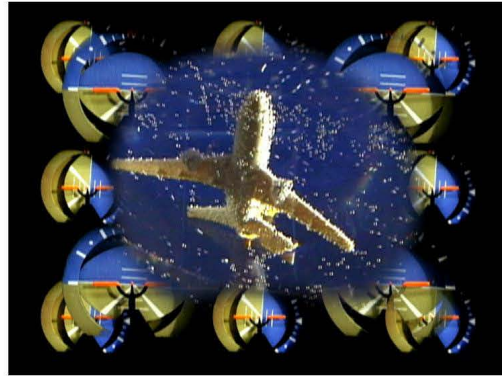
Underscoring this notion, the video projection of the interview is interspersed with video imagery of the interior of a spinning dollhouse that is full of toys. As the dollhouse spins, the toys collide — all in slow motion — emphasizing a sense of helplessness.

There can be no doubt about the incisive precision with which Finley and Muse edited and sequenced this piece. Though seemingly simple, the alternating imagery as it moves between slide and video projection allows for a certain amount of breathing room in which to grasp the underlying tensions.

In its own way, the aforementioned piece, "The Trial of Harmony and Invention," does the same. It brings together unrelated imagery seamlessly to create an environment full of irony — one that is simultaneously calm and uneasy.

Together, both installation pieces offer an opportunity for reflection and observation of emotional responses — one's own and those one might perceive of others.

Kurt Shaw can be reached at kshaw@tribweb.com.



Video still from the installation "The Trial of Harmony and Invention" by Jeanne Finley and John Muse.

Courtesy Pittsburgh Filmmakers