

Mechanized Swooning

Finley, Muse present smart new video piece

Early in its history, abstract painting equated the meaning of an artwork with the viewer's experience of it. Much art made since then can be understood as efforts to cement that equation or explode it.

We feel the tension of that contest even in a work as remote from the issue's roots as the new video piece by Jeanne Finley and John Muse at Sweetow.

**KENNETH
BAKER**
Art

"The Trial of Harmony and Invention" (2000) — its title borrowed from Antonio Vivaldi — puts the viewer into a mechanized swoon.

In a darkened room, one video projector throws a rectangular image on the floor, like a small carpet.

A second projector is trained on a small mirrored disco ball that multiplies images and sends them gliding over walls and ceiling.

Watching the piece play out, one loses sight of the equipment, regains it and loses it again as one's emotional distance from the images varies. That inconstancy may seem like an aesthetic weakness, but it acknowledges the artists' and our own uneasy consciousness of the manipulation involved in a work such as this

and in much else that we experience.

On the floor a shadowy monument, shot at night, appears at first. After a moment, the monument apparently starts to topple slowly.

In fact, the single floor projection has become two: a central, circular portion of the image has begun to revolve, while the rest stands still, like some sort of bizarre timepiece.

The fractured monument sparks memories of the popular assault on communist icons that followed the downfall of Eastern Bloc regimes in 1989.

Meanwhile, over the walls drift images of the circular dials on an airliner's instrument panel, mingled with shots of a butterfly, of tiny toy airplanes in a spin and underwater.

The butterfly might be an emblem both of flight and of "butterfly effects," or the difficulty of tracing events to their true causes.

As aerial images of the ocean blanket the floor, aircraft altimeters appear on the walls, ticking off an agonizing countdown from 2,000 feet to zero, overlain by images of a woman engulfed by water. Memories of the fate of TWA Flight 800 and Alaska Airlines Flight 261 inevitably surface.

The artists' remix of multiple recordings of

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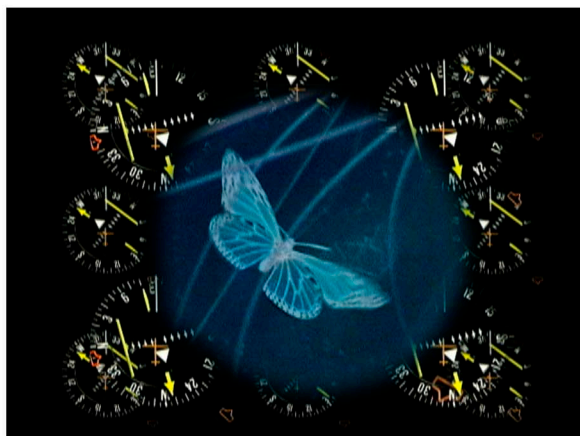
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Vivaldi's "Winter" from "The Four Seasons" makes an emotional surf that swamps the whole spectacle.

"The Trial of Harmony and Invention" smartly parallels fear of flying and the fear of history, that is, of curiosity about the meaning of what happens.

The work even hints that the emotionalism it generates by such obvious means can serve as a refuge from moral consciousness of life and that this is a key to our culture's taste for high-intensity synthetic experiences.

Finley and Muse's work may upstage the rest of Sweetow's group show, but the elegant drawings of Richard Bassett, the brooding photographs of Maizie Gilbert and zany space-travel fantasies of David Huffman should not be overlooked.



A detail of "The Trial of Harmony and Invention" (2000) by Jeanne Finley and John Muse.

GALLERY SHOW

JEANNE FINLEY AND JOHN MUSE: "THE TRIAL OF HARMONY AND INVENTION" AND WORKS BY RICHARD BASSETT, MAIZIE GILBERT, DEBRA GREENE AND DAVID HUFFMAN. Video installation, photographs, drawings and sculpture. Through Feb. 23. Patricia Sweetow Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 788-5126.