

ARTREVIEW

Eroticism of decay

Animation artist Claudia Hart's piece 'Empire' mixes the sensual and the surreal

BY KURT SHAW
TRIBUNE-REVIEW ART CRITIC

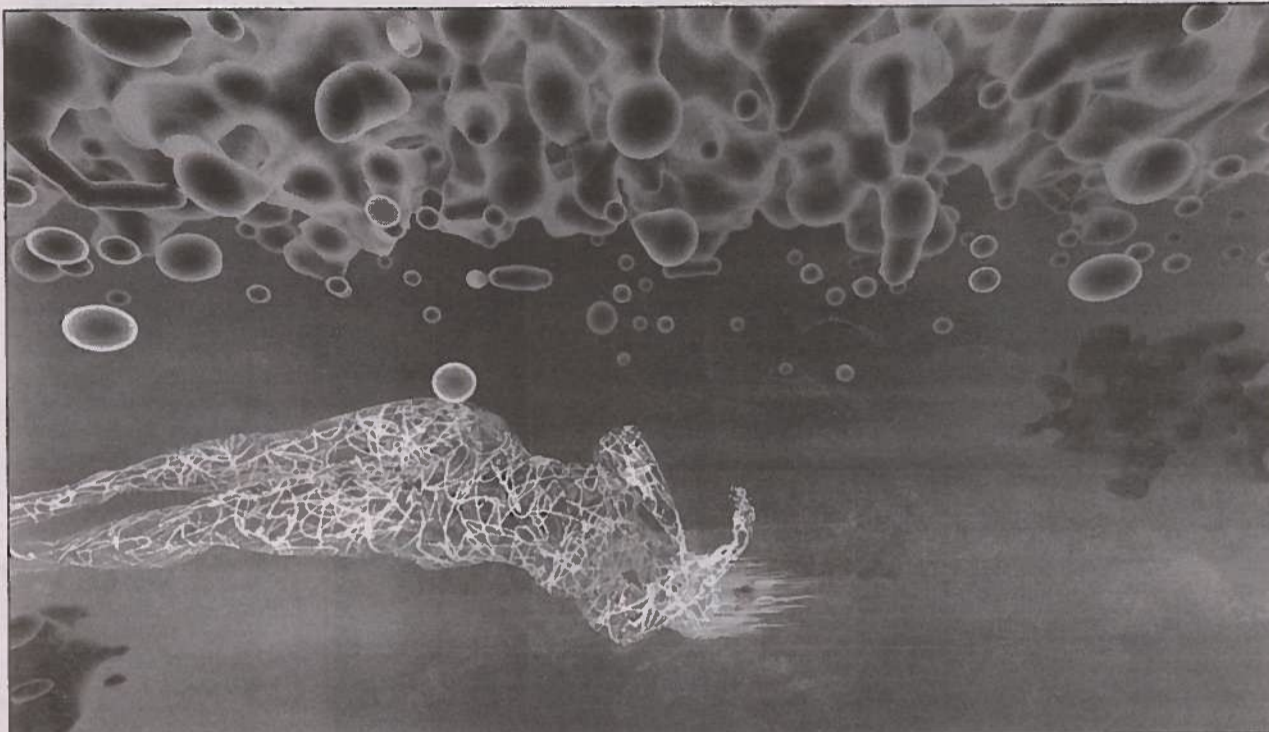
Last Friday, during the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust's spring Gallery Crawl, visitors to Wood Street Galleries were privy to a performance piece like none other.

For the opening of animation artist Claudia Hart's solo exhibit "Empire," the artist created a performance featuring the composer Ella Buckley as an extension of her world. Buckley composed the music for Hart's animation of the same title, which also served as the basis and backdrop for a live improvisatory "performance object," on view during the opening.

During the opening, a box made from crude stage scrim hung in the center of the installation space. Every half hour it was lowered to reveal the performer, Buckley, suspended from wires, hovering 18 inches above the ground. Buckley wore a dress designed by Kristin Mariani Frieman, made from plastic screen material, upon which an image of a rose was projected.

Acting as a cyborg stand-in, Buckley wore jewelry consisting of miniaturized electronic instruments of her own design, complimented by an array of contact microphones attached to her skin. She performed for 10 minutes by stroking her body and rubbing her legs together.

At the end of this cycle, Buckley was lowered and the scrim box raised. The performance was repeated



Claudia Hart's "Empire" pieces are on display at the Wood Street Galleries, Downtown.

throughout the course of the evening.

Now, visitors are left with the animation, "Empire," by itself. The four-screen animation of a virtual monument was inspired by the "Course of Empire," a five-part series of paintings created by Hudson River School painter Thomas Cole in the years 1833-36.

Based on a cenotaph drawn by the 18th-century French visionary architect Etienne-Louis Boullée, "Empire" slowly decays and morphs from pink to blue, from sunrise to sunset. It is a contemplative work in which the viewer is meant to meditate on decay and death and the passage of time. So, the "action" is very slow and

microcosmic: vines grow, bodies bubble and get fat, there is a slow zoom, and a developing bending of space due to the view which is a flattened semi-circle. "In this case, the sublime metaphor is employed in relation to the political decay and collapse of our own USA empire," Hart says.

"The slow-moving pace of the animation is meant to function like focused breathing in meditation, in which one is drawn into a different, slower time-space. Like watching clouds move in the sky. It's the opposite of dramatic story-telling film-making."

The exhibit also contains computer animations that are sensual but not porno-

graphic within mechanized, clockwork depictions of the natural.

For example, in "Ophelia" the exposed body of a naked woman drifts at the bottom of the ocean. Hamlet's lover, Ophelia is a feminist figure embodying the Electra complex, a mad woman who drowned herself for love of a man who murdered her father. But there is another tragedy embodied here, a collision between the technological and the natural worlds. This Ophelia floats at the bottom of a sea littered with refuse and plastic bags, making her an ode to loss: not just of youth and love but also of our own natural world and the possibility of living harmoniously within it. Sound for the piece is a

woman's laughter.

Likewise, in "The Seasons" a seated woman in a pose of erotic abandon cycles clockwise on a rotating pedestal. As she cycles, she decomposes, a vine of roses surrounding her, blooming and then fading away. The room also revolves, though counter-clockwise, while the animation camera pans back and forth. These movements function in counterpoint, to appear only on the edge of perception. Sound for the piece is of crumbling paper. The color scheme is white on white.

Hart says her 3-D animations generally consist of a single female nude, moving slowly, languidly and in a sensual and accordingly erotic, rather than an

'EMPIRE: CLAUDIA HART'

When: Through June 20.
Hours: 11 a.m.-6 p.m.
Wednesdays-Thursdays;
11 a.m.-8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sundays

Admission: Free

Where: Wood Street Galleries, 601 Wood St., Downtown

Details: 412-471-5605 or www.woodstreetgalleries.org

overtly pornographic manner. "I developed it as a series of in-class tutorials for 3-D character animation classes I taught in — and here I use media art pedagogical argot — what has come to be known as a 'production'-oriented art school," says Hart, who is currently an assistant professor in the department of Art and Technology Studies at the Art Institute of Chicago.

"What this means is, in a culture that is vocationally oriented, and therefore engineering-oriented — with the intention of training future digital workers to man proscribed stations in the carefully engineered production pipelines of multimillion-dollar Hollywood effects films or elaborate shooter games. To put it as polemically as I possibly can, we are talking about boot camp for the armies of the military entertainment complex."

In this way, Hart's work subverts clichéd dichotomies of woman and nature pitted against a civilized, "scientific" and masculine world of technology. With this exhibit she is staging a rebellion against culture.

"I am staging a romantic rebellion against a technocratic and bureaucratic culture just as the Romantic revolution of the early 19th century was an artist rebellion against the industrialized world of that time."

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