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Steina Vasulka: PYROGLYPHS**March-May 1996****By: Gene Youngblood****ISBN: 9979-874-67-8**

Steina grew up in primordial Iceland surrounded by that terrible beauty which philosophers call the Sublime. The Aurora Borealis haunted the heavens above her family home. From her window she could see erupting volcanoes, and she could walk up to rivers of flowing lava. *Pyroglyphs* draws on the psychic imprint of that fevered landscape in Steina's youth. The video was recorded at the shop of Santa Fe metalsmith Tom Joyce, with whom she shares "an alchemical understanding of fire, as a medium of transmutation." There she recorded the activities of blacksmithing (manipulating fire, hammering, filing, welding, compressing, cooling), the phenomenology of fire (flames, sparks, smoke, combustions, glowing metals), and various improvised scenes - a vise crushing a timber, a stack of books burning, paper and wood being scorched, plastic melting, a blowtorch held under water. Steina found that the images were similar or dissimilar in compatible ways but the sounds were often too similar or too strident, competing for attention. So sound determined the structure of this three-screen "trio." Only a few of the scenes are visually synchronized because the sounds of each are so dominant; there is often at least one quiet scene that provides background "filler" for the louder images. Steina processed the sounds through a digital harmonizer (which couldn't turn the random noises into harmonics, but produced interesting sounds anyway); a pitch shifter that moves sounds to the octave immediately above or below; and echo circuits. The sounds and rhythms are rendered *allegro con brio*, *pianoforte*, or *pianissimo*: there's a lot of percussive hammering, say, or thunderous rocket-like roaring, then all is quiet and we hear only crackling flame or the hollow whisper of the blowtorch.

Pyroglyphs is a spectacular meditation on fire. Steina has created a Sublime landscape illumined by the many-hued glow of fevered metals and showers of sparkling scintilla. Among the more mystical images are a blowtorch held underwater, played backward in slow motion; smoke that looks like milk; white-hot forms like nuclear isotopes; plastic melting into the image of a flaming vagina; the forge hallucinating a swarm of hellish fireflies. There is a devilish seduction here: Steina makes us feel the hypnotic pull of lambent flames even as our breath is caught by the preemptive ignition of the torch, our hearts quickened by the violence of the forge.

End of Pyroglyphs