

# Gallery Hopping

By DEAN BALSAMO

The sense of poetry found in form played a large role in this week's exhibitions.

■ **Four Video Installations, Steina Vasulka, Center for Contemporary Arts, 291 E. Barcelona Road, through Feb. 24.**

Steina Vasulka is able to distance herself from autobiography, and the usual emotional ploys and expressions we tend to look for in art. Yet at the same time, this position allows her to uncover unsuspected layers of mystery and beauty, even in the most mundane or taken-for-granted activities.

Joseph Campbell says this has to do with the artist taking him/herself out of the limitations of time or re-hashing historical territory and into the demands of the present moment — the here and now. By analogy it's the point or circle rather than the line.

If you're tired of posturing masquerading as real art and artists, go see this show. Vasulka is a master because she creatively responds to life, not to the demands of the market place, art historians and curators.

Vasulka is working from her own responses to the material and situations at hand. *Pyrogllyphs*, the collaboration with metalsmith Tom Joyce is an obvious example. Alchemical notions derived from using fire and other techniques to manipulate metal are ingrained in the video presentation itself. The imagery of transformation is further enhanced by the way Vasulka

introduces this nuance into the rhythm and pacing of the installation.

The viewer is taken into a fantastical realm through Vasulka's multi-screen, projected image approach with a processed soundtrack originating with Tom Joyce's work in the foundry.

This same economy of vision, where none of the artistic strengths of the material are wasted, also characterizes two other pieces, *Borealis* and *Drifts*. Architecture not only plays an important role in the hardware used to create these works, but also provides a metaphoric cast.

This is especially seen in *Drifts*, the most obviously autobiographical work, where elements from pieces over a 20-year period are shown in a bridge-like arrangement of monitors. The opening remarks about distance and perspective also are given impetus here.

Though apparently unrelated images are involved, attentive viewers will sense an underlying intimacy about the presentation.

■ **Recent Works, Michael Nakoneczny, Horwitch LewAllen Gallery, 129 W. Palace, through Feb. 24.**

Although it's been several years since Santa Fe viewers have been treated to Michael Nakoneczny's intensely strange visual musings, it's safe to say he's lost none of his edge.

The mark-making is as raw as ever. Some viewers will call it juvenile. After all, it does conjure up the ballpoint pen scribbles of genitals that adolescent boys often do on their binders during class.

The analogy works up to a point. Nakoneczny does use this kind of energy to drive his work, but this impression quickly fades upon closer examination.

While it may look like Nakoneczny suffers from arrested development or is, at the very least, aesthetically challenged, serious viewers can feel there's a method to his apparent madness.

The fact is, Nakoneczny recontextualizes the energy we equate with this kind of drawing. He's not depicting schoolyard concerns, he's a mad anthropologist rifling the rubble heap of collective urban culture.

Forget about the painstaking removal of the academic is trained to use. Nakoneczny is too busy throwing his discoveries out of the dig, stream-of-consciousness style.

Is it only an artistic ploy or does art and Nakoneczny's life really collide like this?

Who cares? It works. There's a feeling of an authentic, if skewed (and often funny) vision.

Look at the piece with Tylenol, Motrin IB and Advil combined with his rendering of a woodblock print taken from a book on Japanese art.

It's a strange vision. But isn't vision one of those qualities most of us long to see and feel in an artist's work? Yes, there's something manic about his vision, but it's hard to imagine him having trouble getting up each day. There's just too much for this contemporary scribe to record.

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## CASE TRADING POST

### AT THE

## WHEELWRIGHT MUSEUM

# Capturing sizzle and spark of blacksmithing

*Paratimes 1-20-95*

## Vasulka's video/audio work at CCA

By GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY

Video artist Steina Vasulka went into Tom Joyce's blacksmith shop last year thinking she would document his work for a quick promotional piece, keeping her camera a cool distance from the sparks and fire and recording Joyce's craft as part of a trade for metal work he had previously done for her.

But something about the primal sight of glowing iron, the swing and thunder of a hammer on metal, the sizzle and spark of a welding torch drew Vasulka's eyes — and her camera — constantly in for close-up shots instead.

And the sound — with its intensity and percussive character, it easily suggested to Vasulka — a former concert violinist — possibilities akin to music.

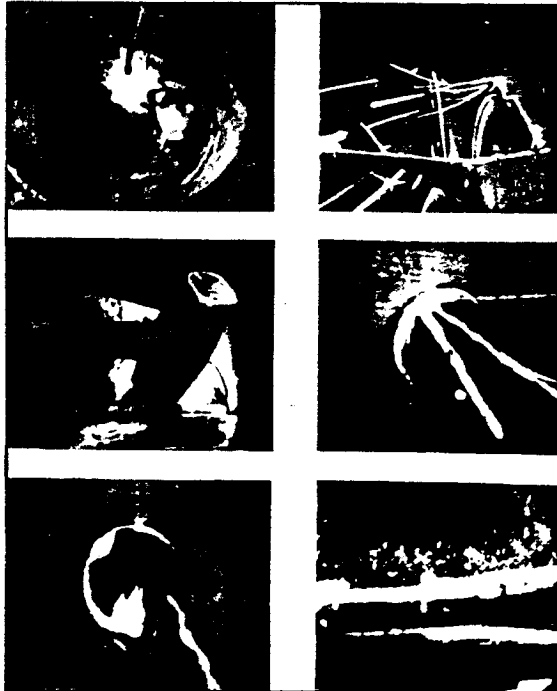
"I stopped by a few times. I interviewed him, and we were going to slap it together," Vasulka said of the intended documentary piece. "Instead, I started doing all these pictures, and I started liking those details, and went back.

"Tom looked at the images and came in with suggestions and we started doing it together, once he understood the kind of images I was after: burning materials, books, liquids, torching wood — these things looked extraordinarily interesting on camera."

The result of this collaboration is a powerful multi-channel video/audio installation, *Pyroglyphs*, opening today along with three other, smaller installations — also by Vasulka — at the Center for Contemporary Arts, 291 East Barcelona Road.

Vasulka has been a pioneer in the field of video art since the mid-1960s, with work exhibited at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and numerous other museums and galleries. She will be present at a reception from 5 to 7 p.m. today for *Pyroglyphs*, which continues through Feb. 24.

To produce the piece, Vasulka began with close-up images and sounds from Joyce's blacksmith shop. Back home in her electronic studio, she combined her finely tuned visual and musical sensibilities with the high-tech effects of a



Steina Vasulka's 'Pyroglyphs' opens today at CCA

### DETAILS

**WHO/WHAT:**  
Steina Vasulka/  
*'Pyroglyphs'* and three  
other multi-channel  
video/audio installations

**WHEN:**  
Opening reception  
5-7 p.m. today

**WHERE:**  
CCA,  
291 E. Barcelona Road

**INFO:**  
Through Feb. 24

digital sound processor and the manipulation of images — all finally projected through three channels of video and six of audio.

The installation is experienced in a darkened room with the only light emanating from the images, projected onto six large (4-by-8-foot), freestanding translucent screens, placed somewhat randomly around the room. The video portion of the repeating 15-minute production is visible from both sides of each screen.

At times, the images on all screens are synchronous; at other times a counterpoint of dissimilar details fills the screens. Footage of hammering, filing metal, welding and igniting various materials is slowed down to a mesmerizing and sensual rhythm, sometimes run backward and forward, and

combined with powerful, compellingly distorted sounds.

From solidly concrete activities, Vasulka has created a visual dance of exquisitely abstract images and a soundtrack of primal energy: a thundering hammer, the soft shuffle of burning paper, the electric sizzle of sparks, a bell-like reverberation.

"You get the sense of how ancient blacksmithing is," she said of the work. "There's something about it that brings up something primordial. Then, strangely enough, people tell me it's an ethnic work, because I'm an Icelander and come from where there are raging lava rivers and volcanoes."

Sitting at the kitchen table of the Agua Fria Street home she shares with Woody Vasulka, her husband and artistic partner, Vasulka talked about her attraction to video art and to the fiery craft of blacksmithing.

Born and raised in Iceland, she grew up experiencing the power and passion of nature in volcanic activity and the tempestuous North Atlantic Ocean. She attended the Music Conservatory in Prague in the early 1960s, where she met and married Woody. The couple later lived in New York, and in 1980, moved to Santa Fe.

When the first portable video cameras became available in the mid-1960s, Vasulka discovered

## Steina Vasulka, continued from Page 4

a form of visual expression that seemed to suit her well.

"I picked up a camera, and to me it was a natural progression: You hold the violin like this, and you hold a camera like this," she said, crooking her arm in front of her face in a motion she uses for both objects.

"I use the camera as an instrument. It's the only medium available to me; if it wasn't for video, I wouldn't be a visual artist. As I've gotten involved in it, from my perspective as a former musician, there's no other medium where you can compare sound and images in the same way."

In *Pyroglyphs*, the sounds — all of which originate from activities in Joyce's shop — are not organized into tonal scales, yet the structure of the piece is more musical than visual, Vasulka said.

"It is very visual, but I rely on the music for the content, to configure it together."

Creating *Pyroglyphs* was an evolution, and an enjoyable experience, Vasulka said.

"I came in to take sort of distant pictures, and then I got thrown into the intricacies of blacksmithing and fire, and then to have Tom thrown into it and make it into a collaboration — it was a complete process.

"Nothing was ever planned, and at the same time, casual things became sort of monumental adventures."

Vasulka's other video/audio installations at the CCA include *Borealis*, composed of close-up and manipulated images and sounds of the turbulent waters of Iceland's rivers, streams and surrounding ocean.

*Machine Vision* was produced using rotating cameras in a closed-circuit environment. ("Don't say anything else about that one," Vasulka said conspiratorially.) The third smaller installation is a collage of her video art from various time periods.

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