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Woody Vasulka with his "Brotherhood, Table III": "I want to evoke the dilemma of using a killing machine."

A Visit With First Couple of Video Art

Steina and Woody Vasulka Have Diverse Takes on Power at LACE

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If your idea of video art is pulling up a chair to watch moving pictures on a single monitor, you may not be ready for the work of Steina and Woody Vasulka. In their installations—which opened Thursday night at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions' new space in Hollywood—Steina invites visitors to stroll around images of Icelandic seascapes projected on translucent screens, while Woody asks his audience to tap on a drum and speak into a microphone in an interactive work about violence and the military-industrial complex.

None of this will surprise the Vasulkas' fans, however. The emigré couple—Steina is a native of Iceland and Woody was born in Czechoslovakia—have been at the forefront of video art for 25 years. They met as students in Prague, emigrated in 1965 to the United States and in 1971 founded the Kitchen, an alternative exhibition and media arts center in New York.

"When we first became involved in video, we worked in collaboration because the medium was so complicated," Steina says. Now the Vasulkas serve each other as assistants and critics, but they have long since developed individual bodies of work.

In their show at LACE, the artists pursue entirely
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Steina Vasulka: "Nature got the best of me and I'm quite happy about it. I'm not urban anymore."

VASULKAS

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different themes in separate spaces. Steina's piece, "Borealis," is an environment of illuminated imagery that portrays nature as an all-powerful force. Pictures appear on both sides of 6-by-4½-foot screens, so that viewers are surrounded by vast images of crashing waves, undulating seas and craggy cliffs.

"I hope people flip out because it's so beautiful," Steina says. "I want people to see and feel what I experience when I make something like this. That's all an artist can ask."

What Steina experienced while creating "Borealis" was a return to her roots. "Nature is a heavy trip in Iceland," she says. "You have to be very careful or you die." As a child she accepted nature's overwhelming presence as normal. "But when I went to Europe I found a world that was incredibly benign, with blue skies everywhere," she says.

Moving to New York turned her into an urban artist, further estranged from nature. But visits to her homeland sparked an intense awareness of her native environment and inspired her to use landscape as a theme.

She and Woody moved to Santa Fe, N.M., in 1980. "I was determined not to get seduced by nature," Steina says. "That lasted about a year. Nature got the best of me and I'm quite happy about it. I'm not urban anymore."

She taped the footage for "Borealis" in 1993. Trying to convey the magnitude and force of nature, she shot mountains and grand vistas, but decided to use close-ups to convey her feelings about human vulnerability and nature's power. "You can't compete with God," she says. "He has done it all, and he has done it much better."

Nonetheless, she professes that the point of art is "to really see God." It's a quaint, old-fashioned notion, completely out of sync with the art world's fixation on politics, Steina says, but no matter. "My interest in video is not the art world's interest in video," she says.

In striking contrast to Steina's concern with superhuman forces, Woody explores man-made power as he considers the specter of warfare and violent behavior. Where her work portrays organic forms, Woody's deals with hard-edged mechanical devices and im-

ages of cast-off military equipment.

His exhibition, "Brotherhood, Table III," is the third portion of an ongoing project, which will consist of six tables largely constructed of surplus materials from the atomic energy facility in Los Alamos, N.M. The metal table on view at LACE is made of a computer that was developed to set off bombs in Cambodia and Vietnam. A slide projector encased in the table projects images of Los Alamos detritus, such as circuit boards and hardware. These vaguely threatening pictures are relayed onto mirrors attached to the table and out into the room, on a group of free-standing and suspended screens.

"I want to evoke the dilemma of using a killing machine," Woody says. But getting the message depends upon viewers' recognition and interpretation of the work's components and ambience. More inclined to pose questions than deliver judgments, Woody speaks of his work in terms of dialogues and philosophical conundrums, while allowing for a degree of ambiguity.

The theme isn't the only complicated aspect of his work. In "Table III" he has constructed a multimedia apparatus that allows visitors to participate in directing how the images are conveyed. This is an outgrowth of his longstanding effort to subvert what he calls "the absolute idea of a single frame," which is fundamental to film and video. He bombards viewers with images, in both enclosed and expansive spaces, enticing them to move around the installation. Those who strike an electronic drum or speak into a microphone will find that their action affects the pictures.

Woody prefers revelations to prescribed experiences in his art, but this presents another dilemma, he says. Interactivity—which is all the rage in the commercial world of electronic products—allows outside players to replace artists as authors or at least to obscure the artists' identity. That may be a logical conclusion of modernism, which was bent on destroying authorship, he says, but it's a question he continues to ponder.

■ "Borealis" and "Brotherhood, Table III," installations by Steina and Woody Vasulka, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 6522 Hollywood Blvd. (213) 957-1777. Wed.-Sun., noon-6 p.m. Free. Ends Sept. 4. The artists will talk about their work at LACE today at 3 p.m.