

Pushing the limit in video

KCOS to air show of video essays

By Mike Pearson

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It's fascinating, but is it art?

That is the question El Pasoans will decide on Oct. 11, when KCOS-TV, Channel 13, broadcasts "Out of the Mainstream: A Television Showcase for New Film and Video."

Like stations in Chicago and New York, KCOS will expose its viewers to avant-garde video essays.

Produced by Frontera Media Arts of El Paso, the 30-minute program highlights recent works by Santa Fe artists Woody and Steina Vasulka, videomakers who delight in "pushing the envelope" of traditional video imagery.

But don't sit down to watch this program, scheduled for 7:30 p.m., with a mindset for situation comedy or nature programs. None of the pieces profiled even hints at commercial potential. Rather, they tend to exploit the senses by challenging the notion that art must be easily accessible.

Which is not, in itself, a lamentable thing. As host Willie Varela explains of the opening segment, "Bad," it's an exercise in sound and image distortion that "tests the limits of what most of us consider good television."

More bluntly stated, "Bad" is a jarring example of video art at its worst; a fusion of screeching tones that recall a synthesizer having a nervous breakdown.

But where the show opens on a low note, it quickly gains ground. None of the pieces is longer than 10 minutes, and the least engaging segments are the shortest.

The real strength of this program are two segments that rely less on shock than on surrealism. Not surprisingly, both are excerpted from longer works.

In 1987's "The Commission," the videomakers recreate the burial of composer Niccolo Paganini, or the lack of it as was really the case. A distorted voice narrates the sad saga of Paganini's body and its four year journey to eventual internment.

That piece is surpassed for thought-provoking content by "Art of Memory," a brilliant pseudo-documentary about the creation of the atomic bomb. As physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer is heard in the background, the screen explodes with black and white war footage, then suddenly yields to stunning colors of an atomic sunrise.

Here the Vasulkas prove their technical mettle: the screen is dissected from nearly every angle; computer-generated images — including Oppenheimer's — twirl mid-picture, and the scientist's mournful indictment of his own creation is elegantly framed by the special effects.

Even with its faults "Out of the Mainstream" challenges the viewer; it makes one consider perception on an alternative plane. KCOS plans to solicit viewer input concerning additional shows such as this.

The Vasulkas will be in El Paso to screen and discuss their work at 7:30 p.m. Oct. 20 at the Bridge Center for Contemporary Art, 600-B N. Stanton St.