

Videos evidence of what TVs were meant for

I watched "Pyroglyphs," Steina Vasulka's 15-minute video environment, twice, then came home and tried to begin this column. I have been held up to a virtual flame, I thought: all fiery intensity with no actual sensation of heat on the face. While this indeed was my experience, I felt becalmed, all ready to curl into a fetal ball, go to sleep with my cat on my hip and dream about water.

In the downstairs gallery at the Center for Contemporary Arts, three video channels project "Pyroglyphs" onto six screens arranged at odd geometries. A mirrored wall alters your depth perception as you move around the room, encountering your own shadow opaquing the projections when you get in the path of the beam. The installation mimics a cave, and the confluence of bodies with the light beams plays out the Platonic idea of dormant man coming to consciousness when he recognizes his shadow on the cave wall.

To my mind Vasulka turns the TV box, or in this case the projection screen, into a kind of Rorschachian self-reference.

The vibrato voice of the machine hums and thrums.

While "Pyroglyphs" was completed only this year, made in collaboration with Santa Fe sculptor Tom Joyce, whose iron foundry provides the setting, I see it as fairly consistent with Vasulka's historic, formal preoccupations. Again she succeeds in rendering an electronic return to the garden, the swamp, the cave, the elemental fire.

She constructs an elaborate fire cosmogony (creation theory) replete with burning bush and dis-

ABOUT ART

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solving canons. We see the human arm wielding the hammer that shapes the molten matter, but the arm is ever disassociated from the body. The Herculean, physical thrust seems small against the glowing, curvaceous, fungoid metal animated with fire.

The events recorded by the camera are exponentially more intense than events seen by the eye, and the artist alludes to a world of passion and intensity in the human relationship with matter that exceeds casual observation.

Parts of "Pyroglyphs" reminded me of Vasulka videotapes past, when from out the monumental surge of water the frame would cut to a fisherman, then the air brakes of a giant truck.

Vasulka combines elements for tension. The soundtrack alternates between the percussive swing of the hammer, scraping, corrosive sounds, and scorching sounds that time foreshortened intervals of flame. The glowing point of the anvil spikes into a blue shimmering star.

Near the end of the tape there's a transition from a static image of a bifurcated blot to a pulsing, livid sea slug that looks like genital tis-

sue with a strand of mucous attached. Perhaps the strand is really glue on a book-binding, but that doesn't mitigate the eerie feeling at all.

A friend of mine leaving the gallery said the soundtrack made her remember the suffocating ether mask she wore during her tonsillectomy.

A long sequence in "Pyroglyphs" shows a vise exquisitely compressing wood until the wood fans and ruffles like a ream of paper.

Then the livid particles of a molten iron pancake leap like electrons in a physics experiment. That this duck-billed sea anemone, the ever-changing molten shapen, transmutes into the cool thing enshrined at a gallery — Tom Joyce's sculpture — is by definition alchemical and mythic and mysterious.

I'm fascinated by Vasulka's constructed mythology. On the one hand she pivots around an aesthetic position that makes nature hyper-gorgeous and composes videotapes out of painterly brush strokes. While the scale of her video is, to say the least, bold, I would not call them earnest. Their intensity wills a rift with earnestness, earnestness to my mind being the predominant characteristic of television.

If the TV set is a frame that lets us erect and destruct cultural icons, Andy Griffith to Oprah to O.J. Simpson, then Vasulka's videomaking opens the door to the lions and the nature gods, like the Norse gods Thor and Loki, resenting the hell out of graven images.

One part meditation on Blake's admonition that "where man is not nature is barren" and one part

IF YOU GO

Four video installations by Steina Vasulka will be at the Center for Contemporary Arts, 291 E. Barcelona Road, through Feb. 23. Gallery hours are Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturday from noon to 4 p.m. 982-1338.

let's-grab-the-camera-hit-the-road-and-get-on-with-it, her work vaults off philosophy with no smarmy sentiment attached. It contains virtual thrust and it works if your pulse races.

The humanism, as my friend remarked, is all associative — not contained within the work but emanating in response to it. I thought, in watching "Borealis," another of the videos, of the fogs of Northern Romantic landscape painters like Caspar David Friedrich; and of Jackson Pollock's action painting.

Her waterscape in "Borealis," which means "northern," is as dramatic, cold and violent as in "Flow," an older videotape. The fisherman we see in "Flow" has a double here in the form of the videographer's shadow projected against the moving landscape of clouds and seafoam.

To present "Borealis" and "Drifts," Vasulka has replaced the TV's boxy housing with metal armatures. They look crude in a way that some 1970s set-ups did, purposefully reducing the altar of the TV set/dream carrier to structure, the low-tech circuitry that blocked society's beta waves for

good.

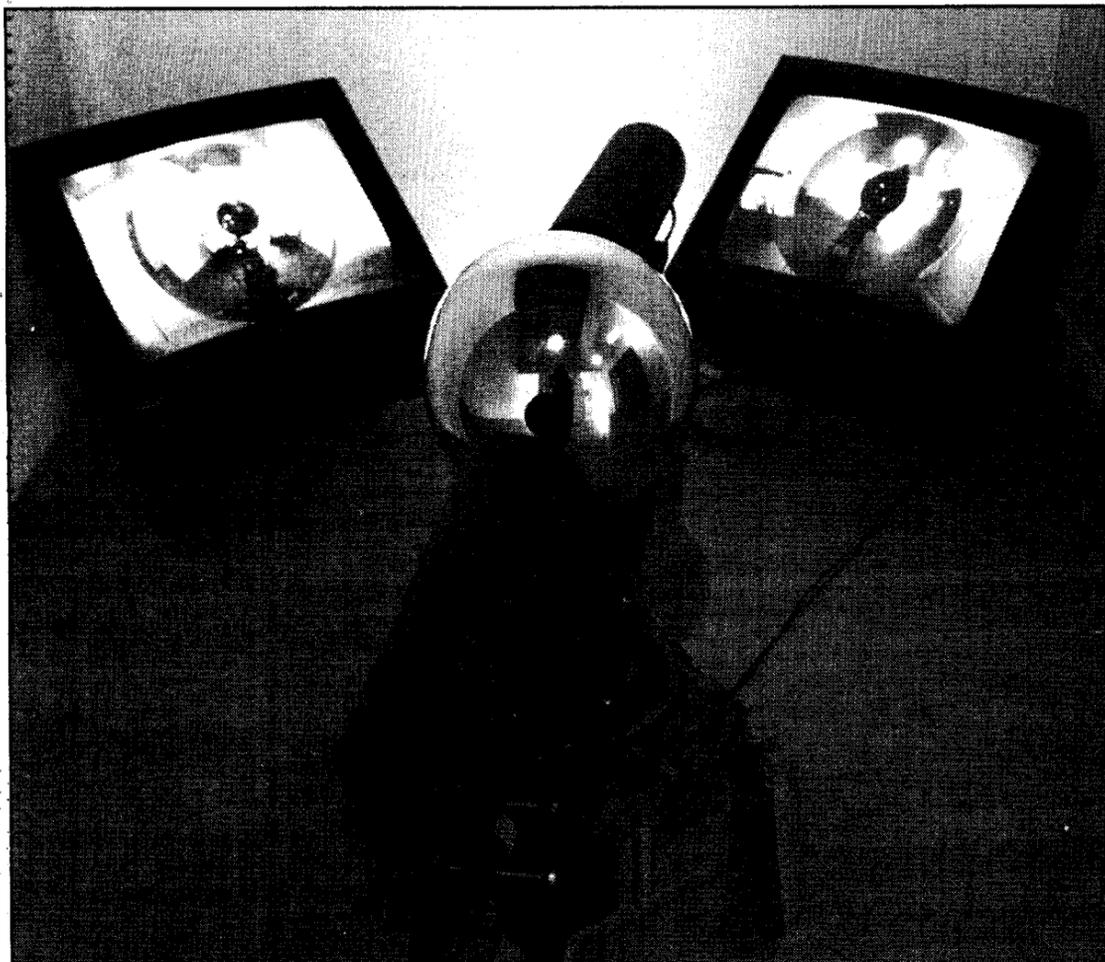
Vasulka injects a strong dose of adrenaline. She may want us calmed, but she doesn't want us numb.

"Drifts," combining tape from the '70s to the present, embellishes her preoccupation with undulating forms, waves, pattern and texture. Images scud horizontally, wiping over one another. Your body starts swaying in rhythm with the edit. Then there's a wonderfully visceral, viscous texture like wet asphalt or paint. The video eye follows it like a mechanical finger, follows the white stripes and primitive symbols juxtaposed

against the black tarry stuff. This is an extended counterbalance of positive and negative.

Black-and-white circles dance so fast across the screen that they break up optically. Finally the tape segues to the VLA radars west of Socorro that resemble skeletal pyramids, their bowls upturned to the sky. You see a sunspot and suddenly it seems that the one sunspot unifies the entire tape — dots, stripes, pixels and all that can be illuminated by light rather than obscured into darkness.

If you have wondered what your TV is for, now's the time to find out.



JAIME DISPENZA/JOURNAL

"Machine Vision II" is part of Steina Vasulka's four video installations at the Center for Contemporary Arts.