



James Garcia / Staff photographer

Steina Vasulka watches over the installation of video screens at Arizona State University's Computing Commons Gallery. Her work turns blacksmithing into music.

Hammer in harmony

Artist gives blacksmith's work a clever bend

By Steve Cheseborough
Staff writer

TEMPE — In Steina Vasulka's hands, a blacksmith's work becomes music.

With digital sound processing, the hammer strikes sound like gongs. The scrapes of a metal file become almost choral. And the sifting of metal debris sounds rather like a string section.

"The harmonizer is my favorite effect. It tries to make some kind of intelligent harmony out of this," Vasulka said.

While the sounds in Vasulka's "Pyroglyphs" installation are interesting enough, there also are visuals — close-ups of seething fire, burning wood, twisting metal. They are projected on screens in a darkened gallery, and viewers can walk among the screens or sit on cushions and take it all in.

The installation runs through Oct. 22 at Arizona State University's Computing Commons Gallery.

Vasulka, 54, is a pioneer of video art.

She was born in Iceland and educated in Czechoslovakia. She came to prominence in New York in the 1970s as one of the principal artists behind The Kitchen, an avant-garde video and performance-art space. She lives in Santa

Fe.

Vasulka's work often has included walls of video monitors. Thanks to improvements in video-projection technology, she said, she now can use screens as an alternative, as in "Pyroglyphs."

"I like projected images," she said. "I never liked to be stuck 'in the box.' But you'd take it because that's what you had. Video-projection units used to be bulky and expensive. Now there are even consumer units."

Vasulka said she conceived of this project after watching a blacksmith work.

"I was taken with blacksmithing, seeing metal become a kind of intelligent object," she said. "The next thing I was taken with was the fire."

When the blacksmith Vasulka worked with, Tom Joyce, saw the kind of images that Vasulka chose to capture, "He said, 'I can make you a lot more interesting ones.' He started really catering to me," she said.

Joyce blowtorched a stack of paper for Vasulka's camera, creating one of the piece's more striking segments. The burning paper twists into brain-like folds, then falls away.

"High drama!" Vasulka exclaimed, watching the video.

After gathering such images, Vasulka began concentrating on the soundtrack.

Vasulka played the soundtrack like an instrument (she has a background as a classical violinist), speeding it up and slowing it down and running it through various digital effects. The visuals' speeding and slowing is a side effect of her work with the sound.

The gallery, in the Computing Commons building on the ASU campus, is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays. "Pyroglyphs" is 12 minutes long and repeats continuously. Admission is free.

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