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MAGIC MUSIC: Steina Vasulka can change video images — and make streams flow uphill — by playing her five-string violin.

PICTURE / GEOFF DALE

Scratch it and see

Penelope Carroll meets an Icelandic violinist who uses her instrument as a remote control

WHEN people say to me, 'But you are just playing!' I say, 'Yes, some people have to do that ...' Steina Vasulka, Icelandic performance artist visiting Auckland, brings together images and sounds, manipulating them through her violin. With its "midi" (musical instrument digital interface) outlet, the violin can control any digital signal, including the images shown on the banks of video monitors.

Waterfalls can flow uphill, faces can rotate and slide at alarming angles, all to the accompaniment of her playing.

She could use a remote control to speed up, slow down or juxtapose the images and sounds. But the violin is fun, it's elegant, and part of the play.

Vasulka was a violinist before she made images. The "music" adds another dimension to her performance.

Born in Iceland 59 years ago, she studied violin at the State Music Conservatory in Prague, marrying Woody Vasulka before returning to play with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra.

They soon left the Arctic Circle island (population 268,000, 40 per cent the size of New Zealand) for New York, where they worked as freelance musicians, began experimenting with video and in 1971 founded the Kitchen, an influential electronic media theatre and exhibition space, with Andrea Mannik.

In 1980 the Vasulkas moved to Santa Fe, where they are still based. The big draw there is more than 300 days of sunshine a year. "When you crawl out from obsessively making images you can open the door and the sunlight streams down on you."

It was seven years ago that Vasulka, having experimented with interfacing her acoustic violin with a variable-speed video player, bought a violin with a midi output and a Pioneer video-disk player.

Interfacing these instruments with a computer gave her instant access to any frame of video on the disk as well as access to fast-slow and forward-backward movements.

"Every image has its own sounds, and in it I attempt to capture something flowing and living. I do not think of images as stills, always as motion."

Her video images hinge on an undefined sense of time, unimpeded by gravity. She is showing what cannot be seen except through the eye of the media, says Vasulka.

"I want the audience to be able to feel part of this creative trance, living for a moment in a mental world where they have never been, to experience

some altered state of mind."

The images for her Auckland performances, *Orka* (life force), were shot by Vasulka in the wilds of her native Iceland, on the streets of Santa Fe and in Japan, where she spent time as an artist in residence. She manipulates them on a bank of 20 screens by playing her violin.

It's not so different from "scratching," she says, but instead of jumping the needle to alter sound, she touches a string to jump from image to image and sound to sound. And it is important to her that they are her images, her sounds. "My work always is about communication. You want always to say, 'Look, how beautiful' ... 'see that? Can you experience this with me?'"

In New Zealand for just 12 days, Vasulka has been out to Auckland's west coast and over to Rangitoto Island, capturing images and sounds.

"I've got these breathtaking images. The light, the textures, the vegetation — it's all too beautiful ..."

□ Interdigitate '98: Steina Vasulka and local artists Sean Kerr and Brent Hayward, at the Herald Theatre, Auckland, Saturday and Sunday.