

Art

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NOW AND ZEN

'Present Moment' uses science and art to tie human, natural worlds

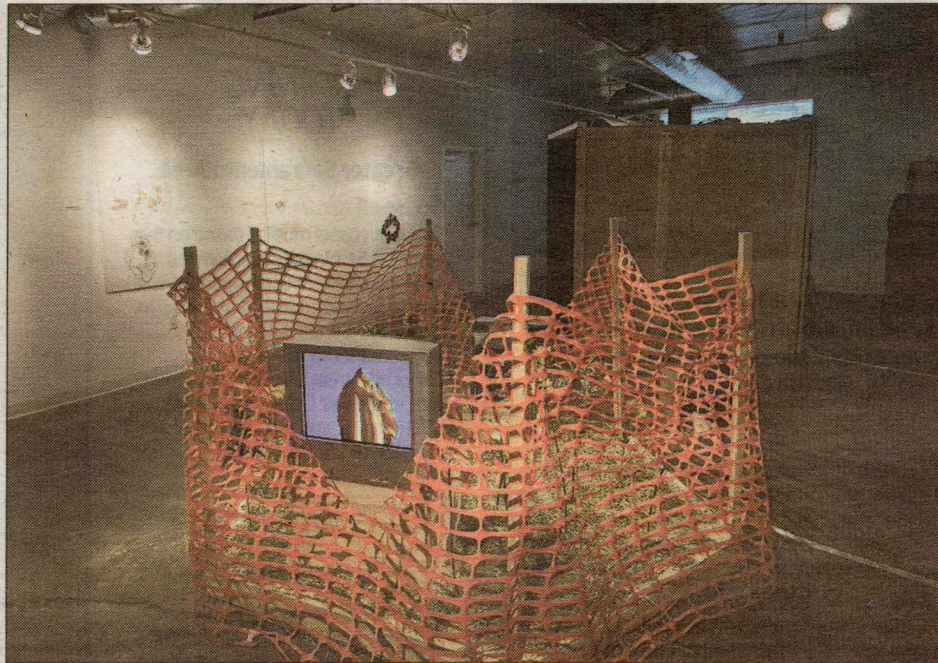
By Victoria Dalkey
BEE ART CORRESPONDENT

Meditations on time, the self and man's relationship with nature and technology are spurred by the works in Rachel Clarke's solo exhibition "The Present Moment" at the Center for Contemporary Art. Clarke, who hails from Shropshire, England, is a professor of electronic art at California State University, Sacramento, and an eloquent advocate for her art, which employs new media and technological methods.

Clarke's inspiration for her work stems from her reading of texts such as Marie-Laure Ryan's "Narrative as Virtual Reality" that relate science and art to digital technology. In "Narrative," Ryan traces the history of the word "virtual." Ryan notes that in the 19th century, the word became associated with something that was an illusion or copy. But in the original Latin, the word means "the power to become," an idea that informs the works in "The Present Moment." Working in both digital and traditional media, Clarke attempts to increase the viewer's Zen-like awareness of being present in the moment while also addressing concerns about the cultural and historical time we live in. Using interactive computer technology, TV screens and projected imagery, she creates metaphors for the human condition based on science, philosophy and history.

Clarke takes up the theme of the environment and our effect on it in "The Garden," a video installation that reflects the influence of the late video and television artist Nam June Paik on Clarke's work. "The Garden" is composed of a short narrative about the creative and destructive forces of our relationship with nature that plays on a TV set in front of a fabricated landscape of weeds and fake flowers enclosed by an open-work grid of orange plastic fencing.

In the video, a man in an odd yellow costume plants and cuts fake flowers in a real landscape that the false one in the gallery mimics. The slow-paced video, set to the elegiac second movement of



In "The Garden," a landscape of weeds and fake flowers enclosed by bright orange plastic fencing contains a TV set on which a short film about the creative and destructive forces of our relationship with nature plays.

Sam Parsons

Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, examines the abstract patterns formed by the undulating plastic fence and traces the gardener's attempt to reshape the natural world, which ultimately leads to the destruction of the garden.

The relationship between nature and technology also informs a series of digital drawings that have a muted palette and intricate patterns based on tendrillike plants and portions of the human anatomy. Though the images are hand-drawn using a tablet and stylus, they are sheathed in shiny Plexiglas and have a synthetic, machined look with little evidence of the human hand that drew them.

The most accessible of these, "Yggdrasil," draws on the Nordic myth of a giant tree of life whose roots and branches encompass heaven, earth and the netherworld. Though the image looks purely decorative at first, the title prompts a quasi-narrative interpretation. Its meandering lines and circular forms suggest umbilical chords, belly buttons and tiny breasts that echo Yggdrasil's role as progenitor and protectress of the world and souls waiting to be born into it.

"The Present Moment," a work that gives the show its title, is an exploration of self and identity in the form of an interactive installation in which real space and virtual space are affected by the presence of the viewer. As you enter the installation, your real self and virtual self interact, creating a continually shifting self-portrait that appears and changes in a randomly ordered sequence of computer generated images.

It's difficult to explain the technicalities involved, but the seemingly endless permutations of your image are fascinating to watch as they move within

grids of bright colors, abstract pointillist landscapes, and swarms of dots that suggest clouds of gnats or swirling Brownian movements. A mind-bending exploration of the self in a state of perpetual becoming, it's the most enjoyable and intriguing piece in the show.

The physical presence of the viewer also completes "Ebb and Flow," a quieter work in which a grid composed of four monochromatic views of the sea is projected on the wall. As you move within a set portion of the floor, the sea also moves in patterns controlled by your actions. Referring to the cycles of tidal movements, the work allows us to ponder the role of time as it affects the natural rhythms of the sea, as well as the effect of our actions on the environment.

"Time Piece," on the other hand, explores our attempts to measure and order time. Whether we measure our lives out, as T.S. Eliot's Prufrock did in coffee spoons, or rush headlong into the day, we can all relate to the tyranny of the clock.

In Clarke's installation, TV screens with images of 12 clocks are arranged in a circle that refers obliquely to England's Stonehenge. Each clock is set to a different hour of the day, but each is set to the same minute in that hour.

In the still center of the circle, time seems to slow down as you examine the images of timepieces that range from old-fashioned alarm clocks to cell phones with digital readouts. But the meditative quiet is broken every five minutes by an alarm on one of the clocks, reminding us of real time and our slavish adherence to it.

Experiential rather than emotional or expressionistic in nature, Clarke's works nevertheless provoke a sense of wonder.

Rachel Clarke: The Present Moment

WHEN: Noon to 5 p.m. Thursday-Sunday, through Oct. 29; reception 6-8 p.m. Oct. 14

WHERE: Center for Contemporary Art, Sacramento, 1519 19th St.

TICKETS: Free

INFORMATION: (916) 498-9811, www.ccasac.org