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, all day.

Vasulka's 15-minute video experience, I felt becalmed, all face. While this indeed was my actual sensation of heat on the face, when from out the monumental sea of Vasulka videotapes past, I thought: all fiery intensity with no thrust seems small against the Herculean, physical arm wielding the hammer that shapes the molten matter, but the arm is ever disassociated from the body. The Herculean, physical arm is ever disassociated from the body. The Herculean, physical arm is ever disassociated from the body.

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 scraping 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, rived sea slug that looks like genital tissue 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 ripples like a ream of paper.

Then the liquid particles of a molten iron pancake leap like electrons in a physics experiment. That this duck-billed sea anemone, the ever-changing molten shape, 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 other hand she pivots around an aesthetic position that makes nature hyper-gorgeous and composes video-outs 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 forms, Tom Joyce, whose iron foundry workers 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 old videotape. The fishbowl voice I see in "Flow" has a double here in the form of the video-grapher'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.

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