

**STEINA VASULKA:**  
*Four Video Installations*  
now through Feb. 24  
Center for  
Contemporary Arts  
291 E. Barcelona Rd.

## Audio-Visual Concerti / Home is Where the Hurt Is

BY TOM COLLINS

**T**V or not TV, to paraphrase Prince Hamlet; that is the question. Whether 'tis nobler to suffer the surfeit of garbage, or to take up the remote and, by opposing, turn it off. It is, of course, one of the central problems in modern American society, and its cultural value is problematic as well. People are always pointing to programs like Sesame Street as examples of how great TV can be, while I've always argued that Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers have simply taught kids first, how to watch TV, and second, that learning is entertaining and fun. (It's not.) Television is the most potent, addictive drug on or off the market today. Almost as addictive and destructive as cigarettes, booze, and crack. But I love riding the wild, late-night surf with that magic clicker clutched in my hand. The relentless waves of audio-visual juxtapositions are more fun than the programs I supposedly am watching. (As Marshall McLuhan always said, the commercials are the real show. And if you didn't know that all you had to do was watch the Super Bowl football game.) Television owes its debt to surreality and surrealism almost more than to the pop aesthetic. It creates an alternate and parallel reality, dependent on memory, desire, coincidence, and its relation to the dream. Who doesn't know the television as the ultimate surreality machine as they late-night channel surf? The random-access blur of images, as noted above, makes for unbeatable, brilliant, absurd nonsense.

Just as they immediately warmed to the still camera and the cinema, artists have used videos since they became available. "Video art" is a knotty conundrum, an oxymoron nearly, that has yet to be resolved and has been described by one critic as having a reputation as "clumsy, narcissistic, and obscure." The medium probably finally was given its imprimatur as a serious, legitimate artistic expression when the Korean-born New York City resident Nam June Paik had a retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1982.

Still, the results of cam-corder art always have been inconsistent. Put me in an art gallery or museum with television monitors and without that remote in my hand and I start to get edgy. Not so with the quartet of video installations by Steina Vasulka currently on view at Santa Fe's Center for Contemporary Arts. For the past 25 years, Steina, often in collaboration with her husband Woody Vasulka, has created a great many video presentations and conducted numerous investigations into the web of electronic audio-visuals. These are the first works by either Vasulka that I have seen, though they live and work in Santa Fe and I've heard of them and their work for years. As is often the case with video art,

the works bear no relation to "real" television as a purveyor of "information" and/or "entertainment." Rather, these works are grounded in a kind of paint-by-video theatricality that, combined with the audiotracks, achieves a balletic, operatic intensity.

It is important to note that Ms. Vasulka grew up in Iceland amidst the forbidding landscape of volcanoes and wild coastline and the technicolor skyscape of the Aurora Borealis. She studied music in France and played violin in the Icelandic symphony orchestra in the mid-'60s. The memories of these experiences are evoked and evident in several of the works at CCA, particularly "Pyroglyphs," recorded on audiotape and color video at the Santa Fe foundry of metalsmith Tom Joyce and playing on six 4-by-8-foot screens, with mirrors split into a dozen competing and complementary images with six-track soundtrack amplified on six speakers, and "Borrealis," black-and-white closeups of a turbulent sea playing in reverse on eight stacked screens.

As Gene Youngblood, author, film and videophile, and professor of moving image arts at the College of Santa Fe,

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notes in his excellent essay that accompanies Ms. Vasulka's work here: "For Steina, a concert violinist, the images and sounds of a multiscreen composition are equivalent to musical polyphony, functioning like voices and instruments in an ensemble. The multiscreen works in this exhibition . . . are audiovisual equivalents of the trio, the quartet, the sextet . . . image and sound is edited to integrate with the others in an audiovisual point/ counterpoint organized around duration, interval, rhythm, repetition, and series."

**I**n the old days, Home was where the Heart was. Odysseus, Homer's (no pun intended) hero, couldn't wait to get back. And there was no place like it for Dorothy. (She got that right, but for all the wrong reasons.) In the modern experience, Home was where the Hurt was. Twain's Tom Sawyer couldn't get away fast enough, and Thomas Wolfe's anti-hero could never go back there again, even if he'd wanted to.

It is this modern, less cheery, dysfunctional (excuse the expression) aspect of the psychological and emotional terrain around Home that Nancy Sutor and Richard Hooker survey in their two-person exhibit at Eidolon, Home: The

Topography of Place. At least that's what I think, and I've been there twice. (Then again, maybe it's just me. "You see, doctor, it was like this . . .")

But there is a sinister darkness suffusing the whole show. First, the storefront window is painted black with the show title in reverse. Enter, and see Hooker's black "house-doors" with appendages painted in black along one wall, and on the other, Sutor's colored pencil and mixed-media on black paper drawings. I don't know if the artists spoke with each other about it beforehand, but they've made something spooky here.

Sutor's drawings echo Matisse in their expressive line, and David Hockney in their obvious delight in the material world of things and objects. But there is a hint of dread even in a tame, supposedly charming domestic scene such as "Kitchen with Mango and Peaches," despite the delightful red chile Christmas lights that trim the border of the window above the sink. "Shadow Room is straight out of film-noir Raymond Chandler. A male and female silhouette are cast upon the seedy yellow light coming through lace curtains while a centrally placed vase of white flowers fights against the murky gloom. The murmuring of secrets that haunts all homes escapes out of the frame. (See the short story, "The Rocking-Horse Winner," by D.H. Lawrence.) In "Interior with Skeleton and Harlequin," death dances with farce precisely as they do in every home in the course of a day, and in "Fire and Water," the flood laps threateningly against the security of the blazing fire in the hearth.

Richard Hooker's evocations of home begin with a precise list of domestic and quasi-domestic activities — Eat, Sleep, Love, Create, etc. — that are given equivalent visual form by way of the repeated use of a pitched-roof black door painted on the wall and appropriate, or inappropriate, props included. The visual poetics are apt, cutting and emotionally charged, never sentimental. "Sleep," for instance, presents three pillows in scorched pillowcases bolted and baling-wired to the black silhouette of the looming door/house. Nights can be like that. "Create" is, again, the stark black door, but with a purple crystal doorknob. It's just waiting to be opened — the trick is picking the lock. His tableau, "The Topography of Home" — all-black chairs, end table, TV set with static black-and-white image around a multi-colored floor of smashed and shattered dishes, etc. — is terrifying and hilarious. We've all been there.

This is the best show so far at the newly opened, artist-run Eidolon. They seem to be hitting their stride, which is good news for interested art observers. ■

**HOME:**  
**The Topography of  
Place**  
Richard Hooker,  
Nancy Sutor  
now through  
March 3  
Eidolon  
207 E. Palace Ave.