Vasulka telecasts in the abstract

By JEROME WEEKS
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The movie camera is generally thought of as a recording device — something "out there" gets put down on celluloid — but the video camera is a manufacturing device, the image is electronic clay, the raw material for a machine product.

Steina Vasulka, who will present and discuss some of her video works tonight at the Rice Media Center, has been a pioneer in what is often called "image-processed" video, although Vasulka has said she doesn’t "care much for images. I don’t have that emotional relationship to the iconic picture like I have with music."

In 1971, Vasulka, who was trained as a classical violinist, co-founded (with her husband Woody) The Kitchen, the arts exhibition space in New York City well known for its avant-garde and alternative works. Since then the Vasulkas have moved to Buffalo and, most recently, Santa Fe, N.M., where they have moved beyond their early video documentary efforts into the manipulation of what Woody has termed "an energy system." The title of one of her series — Machine Vision — sums up Steina Vasulka’s concern: developing and re-thinking her visual tools. In fact, Vasulka’s explanations of how she adapted her often self-designed equipment are as fascinating as any of her works.

When the video artist abandons the traditional, "painterly" concerns of the camera — the frame, perspective, etc. — the results still often resemble abstract or Cubist art, and Vasulka’s tendencies are no different. In Urban Episodes (1980), which will be shown tonight, she has taken a camera, placed it on a slow-moving turntable in the middle of downtown Santa Fe, attached various mirrors and a zoom mechanism, and let it run — thus taking the three camera motions (pan, tilt and zoom), automating them (making them free of subjective human interference) and creating a stately kaleidoscope full of odd juxtapositions and eye-bending angles. A Picasso extended in time with a dizzying rhythm.

Or a Seurat. Some of Steina’s other works reduce her images to so many pointillist light particles, dancing to the throbbing, low-frequency hums created by Woody. —

The most recent work she will present, however, moves from the painterly to the sculptural. The West (1983) is a multi-channel installation using several monitors displaying spare, image-processed New Mexico scenery — mesas, ruins, canyons, even a VLA (Very Large Array) radio-telescope. Yet the connections to her earlier works are still present — including a fascination with the distortions presented by mirrored globes, and a sense of empty space and time.

Steina in August will be presented by the Southwest Alternate Media Project at 8 p.m. at the Rice Media Center, University Boulevard at Stockton. Admission is $3.