I watched "Pyrographs," Steina Vasulka's 15-minute video environment, twice, at the same hour and tried to begin this column. I have been held up to a virtual flame, I thought all fiery intensity with no actual sensation of heat on the face. While this indeed was my experience, I felt calmed, all ready to curl into a fetal ball, go to sleep with my cat on my hip and dream about water.

In the downstairs gallery at the Center for Contemporary Arts, three video channels project "Pyrographs" onto screens arranged at odd geometries. A mirrored wall alters your depth perception as you move around the room, encountering your own shadow opaquing the projections when you get in the path of the beam. The installation mimics a cave, and the confusion of bodies with the light beams plays out the Platonic idea of dormant man coming to consciousness when he reorients his shadow on the cave wall.

To my mind Vasulka turns the TV box, or in this case the projection screen, into a kind of Rorschachian self-reference. The vibrato voice plays out the stream of consciousness contained within the work but exceeds casual observation. Parts of "Pyrographs" 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 scorching 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, liquid 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 long sequence of mine leaving the gallery said the soundtrack made her remember the suffocating ether mask she wore during her tonsillectomy.

A long sequence in "Pyrographs" shows a vise exquisitely compressing wood until the wood fans and ruffles like a ream of paper. Then the livid particles of a molten iron pancake leap like electrons in a physics experiment. That this duct-billed sea anemone, the ever-changing molten shapen, 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 one hand she pivots around an aesthetic position that makes nature hyper-gorgeous and composes videotapes out 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 destroy cultural pyramids, their bowels turned up to the sky. You see a sunspot and suddenly it seems that the one, sunspot unifies the entire tape — dots, stripes, pixels and all that can be illuminated by light rather than obscured into darkness.

IF YOU GO

Four video installations by Steina Vasulka will be at the Center for Contemporary Arts, 291 E. Barcelona Road, through Feb. 23. Gallery hours are Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturday from noon to 4 p.m. 982-1338.

One part meditation on Blake's "Drifts," combining tape from the '70s to the present, embellishes her preoccupation with undulating forms, waves, pattern and texture. Images scud horizontally, wiping over one another. Your body starts swaying in rhythm with the edit. Then there's a wondrously visceral, viscous texture like wet asphalt or paint. The video eye follows it like a mechanical finger, follows the white stripes and primitive symbols juxtaposed against the black tarry stuff. This is an extended counterbalance of positive and negative. Black-and-white circles dance so fast across the screen that they break up optically. Finally the tape segues to the VLA radars west of Socorro that resemble skeletal pyramids, their bowls upturned to the sky. You see a sunspot and suddenly it seems that the one, sunspot unifies the entire tape — dots, stripes, pixels and all that can be illuminated by light rather than obscured into darkness.

If you have wondered what your TV is for, now's the time to find out.