The sense of poetry found in form played a large role in this week's exhibitions.

Four Video Installations, Steina Vasulka, Center for Contemporary Arts, 291 E. Barcelona Road, through Feb. 24.

Steina Vasulka is able to distance herself from autobiography, and the usual emotional ploys and expressions we tend to look for in art. Yet at the same time, this position allows her to uncover unsuspected layers of mystery and beauty, even in the most mundane or taken-for-granted activities.

Joseph Campbell says this has to do with the artist taking himself/herself out of the limitations of time or rehashing historical territory and into the demands of the present moment — the here and now.

If you're tired of posturing masquerading as real art and artists, go see this show. Vasulka is a master because she creatively responds to life, not to the demands of the market place, art historians and curators.

Vasulka is working from her own responses to the material and situations at hand. Pyroglyphs, the collaboration with metalsmith Tom Joyce is an obvious example. Alchemical notions derived from using fire and other techniques to manipulate metal are ingrained in the video presentation itself. The imagery of transformation is further enhanced by the way Vasulka introduces this nuance into the rhythm and pacing of the installation.

The viewer is taken into a fantastical realm through Vasulka's multi-screen, projected image approach with a processed soundtrack originating with Tom Joyce's work in the foundry.

This same economy of vision, where none of the artistic strengths of the material are wasted, also characterizes two other pieces, Borealis and Drifts. Architecture not only plays an important role in the hardware used to create these works, but also provides a metaphorical cast. This is especially seen in Drifts, the most obviously autobiographical work, where elements from pieces over a 20-year period are shown in a bridge-like arrangement of monitors. The opening remarks about distance and perspective also are given impetus here.

Though apparently unrelated images are involved, attentive viewers will sense an underlying intimacy about the presentation.


Although it's been several years since Santa Fe viewers have been treated to Michael Nakoneczny's intensely strange visual musings, it's safe to say he's lost none of his edge.

The mark-making is as raw as ever. Some viewers will call it juvenile. After all, it does conjure up the ballpoint pen scribblings of genitals that adolescent boys often do on their binders during class.

The analogy works up to a point. Nakoneczny does use this kind of energy to drive his work, but this impression quickly fades upon closer examination.

While it may look like Nakoneczny suffers from arrested development or is, at the very least, aesthetically challenged, serious viewers can feel there's a method to his apparent madness.

The fact is, Nakoneczny recontextualizes the energy we equate with this kind of drawing. He's not depicting schoolyard concerns, he's a mad anthropologist rifling the rubble heap of collective urban culture.

Forget about the painstaking removal the academic is trained to use. Nakoneczny is too busy throwing his discoveries out of the dig, stream-of-consciousness style.

Is it only an artistic ploy or does art and Nakoneczny's life really collide like this?

Who cares? It works. There's a feeling of an authentic, if skewed (and often funny) vision.

Look at the piece with Tylenol, Motrin IB and Advil combined with his rendering of a woodblock print taken from a book on Japanese art.

It's a strange vision. But isn't vision one of those qualities most of us long to see and feel in an artist's work? Yes, there's something manic about his vision, but it's hard to imagine him having trouble getting up each day. There's just too much for this contemporary scribe to record.

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Capturing sizzle and spark of blacksmithing

Vasulka's video/audio work at CCA

By Gussie Fauntleroy

Video artist Steina Vasulka went into Tom Joyce's blacksmith shop last year thinking she would document his work for a quick promotional piece, keeping her camera a constant distance from the sparks and fire and recording Joyce's craft as part of a trade for metal work he had previously done for her.

But something about the primal sight of glowing iron, the swing and thunder of a hammer on metal, the sizzle and spark of a welding torch drew Vasulka's eyes—and her camera—constantly in for close-up shots instead.

And the sound—with its intensity and percussive character, it easily suggested to Vasulka—a former concert violinist—possibilities akin to music.

"I stopped by a few times. I interviewed him, and we were going to slap it together," Vasulka said of the intended documentary piece. "Instead, I started doing all these pictures, and I started liking those details, and we went back.

"Tom looked at the images and came in with suggestions and we started doing it together, once he understood the kind of images I was after: burning materials, books, liquid and thunder, a hammer on metal, the sizzle and spark of a welding torch drew Vasulka's eyes—and her camera—constantly in for close-up shots instead.

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