

AT THE GALLERIES

KENNETH BAKER

Rooms With Video, Chairs That Aren't

I like to keep an eye on New Langton Arts (1246 Folsom Street) because the structure and atmosphere of its interior space change with almost every show. The current trio of video installations is especially transporting in this respect because the three artists, Doug Hall, Steina and Francesc Torres, put real and videonic space to very different uses. This show will be followed by a second set of video installations by Howard Fried, Shigeo Kubota and Tony Oursler.

Francesc Torres' "The Dictatorship of Swiftness" was reviewed here when it premiered at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, which commissioned the piece, so it won't be considered in detail now. Torres' video program for six color monitors is a pictorial rumination on violence, which wreaks some psychological violence on those who watch it. The most memorable thing about it is a drubbingly reiterated image of a stock car spinning so far out of control that it bounces up and down on its front end like a pogo stick. Contrary to expectations, this image gets more immediate and horrific the more it is repeated.

Torres' piece seems to be a detailed but ambiguous response to the question of whether representations of violence impair our moral responsiveness to the real thing.

Doug Hall's installation, walled off in a darkened space of its own, is less didactic in spirit than Torres', but it too has a nightmarish quality.

Fine print at the entrance to the installation warns visitors that the objects inside are charged with low voltage, which may be dangerous when touched by either children or people wearing pacemakers.

The only light in the room is provided by the big video projection on the wall and the tiny black-and-white video tube that sits on an electrified metal table. Facing the

table are two strangely proportioned electrified metal chairs. Chairs and table are connected to a phalanx of large batteries located behind them. I wonder whether Hall is aware of the installation Robert Morris did early in the 1970s using electrified furniture. His piece is not exactly derivative of Morris', but the reminiscence is inevitable.

Hall calls his piece "The Plains of San Augustin," after the part of New Mexico where he apparently shot some of his tape.

The theme of the installation seems to be the humbling contrast between natural and man-generated forces, nuclear energy excepted. On the big screen, we see dramatic shots of lightning storms, some terrifying views of a tornado, the pitch and roll of wind-churned seas shot, it appears, from the deck of a small ship.

Meanwhile, on the little black-and-white screen are laboratory recreations of lightning and of funnel clouds, interspersed with passages of video "snow."

The point of all this seems a little obscure, but Hall's landscape imagery is admirable: it is sublime in the 18th century sense of evoking the terrible vastness of reality.

Steina's "The West," with a growling electronic soundtrack by Woody Vasulka, is also a landscape video. Here, four color monitors are stacked together on the floor so that they become almost like one big square window with four panes.

Despite its brilliant color quality and often bizarre landscape imagery, the real fascination of Steina's tape is in its editing. There is a long passage in which she plays camera pans against horizontal wipes, passing images back and forth from screen to screen in a way that is hypnotic and unforgettable. Her piece has its tedious stretches, but they are worth sitting through

to see what she has done with horizontal motion. In one particular passage, she has invented a vision of landscape that is possible only in the video medium.