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Haunting art: Interactive computerized exhibit is one of a kind

Kevin Lynch — 9/21/2007 8:28 am

The classic haunted house is a welter of decaying bodies and spirits, the senses caught in cobwebs of paranoia, the sound of heavy chains dragging your primal fears into a dark pit.

Consider it again, as a structure more digital than dank, a new kind of haunted house to prime you for the Halloween season. You walk into a dark room inhabited by disembodied voices, strange music and reality-defying images. But it's a house of computerized possibility, and about how creativity can spur the spirit as much as spook it.

The project doesn't deny the vagaries or horrors of the real world, but puts them in their psychic place.

"The Drawing of Ghosts/Horror Vacui" is an ingenious interactive computer arts installation that will open Sunday and run through Sept. 30 in the Rotunda Studio in the lower level of the Overture Center.

It's a one-of-a-kind sensory immersion concocted by a phalanx of creative Madisonians from various disciplines.

It's designed for all ages and works hard to expand and challenge the imagination without inducing nightmares.

The head sorceress is Corinne Heath, a longtime Madison choreographer and theater veteran who now also does computer animation. She has collaborated with keyboardist-composers Joan Wildman and Joan Reynolds, sound engineer and radio announcer Buzz Kemper, digital photographer Joanna Been, poet and Web site designer Eric Prendergast, lighting designer John Frautschy and Steve Braunginn, a radio and TV veteran, educator, poet and former director of the Urban League of Madison.

This diversely talented group has conjured a place designed to be fun and stimulating, and the visitor completes the picture with his or her response.

"There is nothing to fear from monsters that prowl the dark. Nothing is mere potential. It's only that, sometimes, absence can take on so much presence."

That's part of Prendergast's poem "Horror Vacui," which serves as a thematic aspect of the installation. You'll hear that poem and Prendergast's "The Drawing of Ghosts," recited by Kemper and Braunginn's voices. Kemper gleefully cleaved and "mashed" the voices and musical motifs from Wildman and Reynolds into a recorded soundscape for the installation.

The resulting sonic witch's brew fills the space and lets the poetry reverberate with multiple meanings. Kemper, best known as an expert concert and recording engineer at Audio for the Arts recording studio, has helped craft recordings for the likes of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Yo-Yo Ma, Ani DiFranco and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Now he's feeling his creative oats by digging into other people's material.

This collaboration should speak to a headphoned multi-tasking generation increasingly attuned to sensory information bombardment. But it also fills a psychological and sensory void, Heath thinks.

"Horror vacui" is a theory, originally attributed to Aristotle, which posits that nature abhors empty space. Thus, in physics, a vacuum would be filled with gas or liquids to avoid emptiness. In visual art, horror vacui manifests as the impulse to fill in all spaces with figures, ornamentation or detail.

Heath sees horror vacui as a prevalent fear of the Middle Ages, which Renaissance perspective helped to alleviate by cultivating an awareness and understanding of spatial depth, which allowed visual breathing space.

Heath sees the virtual reality of computer animation as helping allay that instinctive fear and creatively explode three dimensions into a new level of



Corinne Heath

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Animation by Corinne Heath, from which these stills were taken, is part of the variety of art that makes up the computer arts installation opening Sunday at the Overture Center.

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perception.

"Since the Renaissance, we've had the boxed theater stage, but today the computer is multiple planes so it's a different kind of theater space," says Heath, who has choreographed for American Players Theatre and Milwaukee Repertory Theater.

"On a stage, I could never allow the audience to see dancers from all angles. Now I can."

In Heath's animation for the installation, two young people discover how they can rotate in space as weightless dancers and see how color fills their life. The piece seems to encourage self-awareness and creative risk-taking.

Pianist-composer Reynolds' concept for the installation provides a skeleton key to unlock global awareness. For her, ghosts signify disappearing life forms in our threatened and distressed natural environment.

Inspired by Al Gore's film and book "An Inconvenient Truth," on the devastating effect of global warming, Reynolds created music to evoke melting glaciers, drowning polar bears, disappearing rain forests and other "ghosts" of nature.

Wildman has created an animation video involving a whimsical visit between two ghosts that brims with playful ectoplasmic body morphing, set to her own skittering piano trio music, which is closer to the idiosyncratic bop era legend Herbie Nichols than, say, "Peanuts" pianist Vince Guaraldi.

What makes this all more meaningful fun is the role the visitor plays.

"Our philosophy is that people are the exhibit too," says Heath, who earned a master's degree in computer education from Edgewood College in 2002 after disbanding her modern/jazz dance company SYNERGY! in 1992. "The people's reaction is part of the art."

"I always knew I created a good dance when somebody responded by telling me something about their childhood. That means it's really speaking to people's feelings toward it."

So step right in to this little haunting and don't leave your imagination at the door.

The Details

What: "The Drawing of Ghosts/Horror Vacui," an interactive computer arts installation. When: Sept. 23-30. Where: Rotunda Studio, lower level of the Overture Center. Admission: Free. For more information:

www.drawingofghosts.com

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