



I-80 Cultural Exchange

Echotrope, Visual join to screen video art in Omaha, Lincoln

By Michael Joe Krainak

While generally agreed that a cultural disconnect exists between Lincoln and Omaha, two entrepreneurial arts groups have plugged into each other making that one hour each way trip unnecessary for fans of experimental video and film.

Taking advantage of their talent and resources, Lincoln's Visual and Omaha's Echotrope, both unique DIY arts organizations, are collaborating on a successful video arts screening which premiered last Friday at the UNO Art Gallery and will show again this Friday, May 5 at 7 p.m. at the Ross Media Arts Center in Lincoln.

Titled Visual II, the 66-minute show features the short films of 13 regional and national time based artists who clearly have a following but are definitely not in the mainstream. Though different in organization and style, both DIY groups share a common desire to bring alternative media to their market.

"The Visual and Echotrope have similar goals," Jen Lukas, spokesperson for the former said. "We want to expose the public to interesting video art. Some artists are friends of ours and others were from Echotrope's submissions from around the U.S. It was great to have such a variety of choice to compile this show."

Though the Visual is essentially an annual exhibition organized by Lukas and Lincoln artists Robbie Wilkins and Justin Kemerling, Echotrope is an Omaha-based nomadic group created by the husband-wife team Russ Nordman and Jody Boyer, both artists and instructors in intermedia and digital art. Echotrope is currently working on projects with the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, the South Bend Regional Museum of Art, as well as the UNO Art Gallery.

"The Visual is the second shorts exhibition Echotrope has worked on," Boyer said. "This time there are a greater number of experimental pieces, but the show (Visual II) is still a great combination of cross-genre work...and the unexpected."

Those who saw Visual I last year, either at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery or next at the Hot Shops Art Center, will remember it as much for its style and flair as well as for its excellent mix of alternative film and video. This included mime performers who set the stage and mood and marvelous poster graphics credits and signage in the program loop that introduced each piece, all created by Kemerling.

Visual II also includes a clever audio-video prelude of pulsating club music and a digitized readout that morphs into the show's title, all credited to Kemerling. Though last Friday's screening was a bit staid given its academic setting, this coming performance at the Ross suggests a different tone with a cash bar and appetizers at 6:30 p.m.

Viewers can expect to see the same set of experimental media carefully chosen by the Visual and Echotrope curators. The play list includes several pieces from filmmakers from the East and West coast as well as the Midwest. This includes Louis Libitz, an adjunct professor at Syracuse currently in pursuit of his MFA in art video; Julie Orser is a multi-media artist primarily in video, photography and installation living and working in Los Angeles; Michael Hession, a videographer, curator and editor, also in the Syracuse, N.Y., area; Greg Bierman, an instructor in Computer Animation and Cinema Studies in Paramus, New Jersey; and closer to home, Elisabeth Reinkordt and Wilkins himself, video artists from Lincoln.

As anticipated, no two works in Visual II are alike as they vary not only in form and subject but tone as well. Libitz comments and enlightens, Wilkins empathizes, Bierman amuses, Orser and Hession conceptualize and Reinkordt satirizes, to name but a few. Though some pieces are more effective than

others in the realization of their intent, each is an original and, yes, entertaining example of video art.

“Vortex” by Peter Burr. The simplest and purest example of digital video art in the show, it is a natural segue from Visual II’s intro. Typical of Burr’s experimental video, “Vortex” is a steady stream of colorful, pulsating graphic matrices. The overall effect of this digital mosaic is both hypnotic and hallucinatory.

“D-Information” by Louis Libitz. This may be the show’s signature piece as it layers a relentless monologue, in monotone, of the Digital Age’s impact on society and pop culture. The narration is academic and the imagery is pop, sensational, iconic and graphic. The overall effect is mesmerizing, an overwhelming yet truthful commentary on the blending of propaganda, information and the media.

“Water” by Jacob Galle. A nice change of pace and mood in the show, this very short film is an ethereal tone poem of electronic music and grey, grainy photography. The film’s romantic, dreamlike imagery simply washes over you, as its central motif, a wave, glides to the shore.

“Alignment” by Michael Hession. This conceptual film combines a funny, cryptic, episodic narrative with deliberately cheesy, amateurish imagery in a style that smacks of Kevin Smith. A key image is a stream of brackish water that meanders across blacktop without much rhyme or reason like the film itself. Yet somehow, this random, understated film is in its own way life affirming.

“Goat Song” by Greg Bierman. Utilizing multiple images of his portrait, Bierman matches different facial expressions in an incessant cacophony of street and barnyard sound effects that you will either find rude and annoying or clever and entertaining, aka Monty Python.

“Beating, Breathing, Spinning” by Gerald Harbotin. The most eloquent piece in the show, “B.B.S.” combines stop animation, beautiful drawings and Bach’s music to illustrate the cycle of inspiration and artistic creation itself. The brain pulses, an idea is born, a song emerges, an instrument gives it voice. Only the song lives on, beating, breathing, spinning and inspiring.

“Room Tone” by Robbie Wilkins. The title seems contrived, the film runs a bit long, but this straightforward series of personal narratives cross-cut and interwoven is nonetheless a deeply felt homage to how we all survive loss. Some stories work better than others, but it builds nicely to shared moments of epiphany and transition.

“Bit Parts” by Julie Orser. Again, a nice change of pace, we move from the literal to the metaphoric as the “bits” in this film connect only randomly and conceptually as a bouncing ball crashes to the floor as a pile of broken dishes, a phone rings, off the cradle, a vacuum cleaner roars, plugged in, and a squirt gun squirts, with a bang.

“You & Me” by Elizabeth Smolars. A crowd pleaser, two similar to begin with male and female portraits digitally, seamlessly exchange features and places and become each other. Not a heavy statement, but a nice one. “You & Me” are now “Me & You.”

“Were Screwed” by Elisabeth Reinkordt. A clever political, or at least social satire on popularity, male-female role propaganda and playing and popular media processing.

“Don’t Mouse Around” by Jeremy Bailey. On a lighter touch, Bailey uses digital manipulation to poke fun at how we are manipulated in the digital age. A prone figure is probed puppet like by multiple mouse cursors.

“The Tracing” by Brent Meires. Another crowd pleaser, this original mix of performance and video plays with our perception as the artist superimposes himself tracing his own image only to have it return the favor. It’s a witty use of special effects and artistic license.

“The Delicious” by Scott Penderghast. The most ingenious film in Visual II, this is a humorous, satirical look at a married pair of GenY’s locked into their urbanized lifestyle and Yuppie-ish conformity. She is cool with it, but he, looking to touch base with his feminine side, trades in his dark suit and striped tie for her bright red, size 12, stretch pant suit. Oddly, it suits him in a Napoleon Dynamite way as his transformation is progressive in this marvelous comedy of the absurd.