Exhibit looks at who is running the show and plays with technology in the natural world

By Jackie Jadrnak   June 17th, 2016

"Mesocosm (Wink, TX)," 2012, is a real-time generative program on computer monitor with sound, created by Marina Zurkow.

There are two different ways to approach the new art exhibit at Art House.

You could ponder deep philosophical questions about whether independent intelligence can exist at all in computers – and, in the reverse, whether humans are simply biological machines responding to coding embedded in their genes.

Or you can just have a hoot playing with the interactive artworks or watching images morph or unfold, depicting things such as a day in the life of a fracking sinkhole or a rural Kansas barn, or the real-time labor of setting a fencepost.

Then again, maybe you can just gaze upon a breathtaking still image by photographer Stephen Wilkes compressing in one scene all the animals visiting a watering hole in Serengeti National Park in one day.

You can do it all and more during a visit to "Mouse in the Machine: Nature in the Age of Digital Art," the latest exhibition with an opening 5-7 p.m. Saturday at the Art House, 213 Delgado St., a project of the Carl & Marilynn Thoma Art Foundation.

The overall theme of the show, explained gallery staffer Kathleen Richards, plays with the "Ghost in the Machine" concept, which represents philosophers' concept of mind-body duality – that there was some separate part of us, a soul, running our personal show. "Mouse" is subbed in for "ghost," though, to bring up the image of a computer mouse issuing directions.

And the "nature" in the subtitle can refer to our own human natures or the global life on many levels that surrounds us in the environment.

Thus, you can "look at the natural world through the language of the digital world," as Richards put it, by seeing how Wilkes extracted a single image from 2,200 photographs taken over 26 hours at the watering hole. The profusion of animal life over time shows the centrality of that spot to the natural world that might not be as evident in activity there at any single point in time.

Alan Rath's "Wall Eye I," 1997, is made up of electronics, generative software, a CRT monitor and aluminum. (Courtesy of Art House)

Or Nam June Paik in "TV Fish" (2000) contrasts the languid glides of actual goldfish in an aquarium with TV images behind it of rapidly shifting, chopped-up images that also occasionally flash with fish. It makes you wonder if the real fish will have a nervous breakdown from the constant stimuli, although they seemed serene enough on a recent visit. It also sets a new standard for maintenance for an art work – Richards said, yes, she has to clean the tanks and feed the fish.

Harold Cohen made a machine and algorithm to create and print out its own art, which he then colored. So, Richards asked, is the computer simply responding to its programming, or is there an element of learning and choice in how it puts together the images? "Is the computer or the algorithm making the artistic choices?" she said.

The element of computer choice also comes into question with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's "Please Empty Your Pockets" (2000). This interactive piece can become addictive. It calls for the viewer to drop a small item on an airline security-type conveyer belt. The item is recorded in the system and then depicted in a one-of-a-kind image with an assortment of other items from some 600,000 in the virtual inventory.

The artist often works with the idea of the growing amount of surveillance in our world and the question of what happens to those images, Richards said.

"RA46," 1978, is a computer-generated drawing, enlarged and hand-colored in acrylic on unstretched canvas by Harold Cohen.

A couple of pieces included audience participation: one in which people chose to participate, another that caught them unawares.

The latter can be seen in Jim Campbell's "Grand Central Station N. 3" (2009). Campbell is a technical genius who developed the high-resolution color computer chip, according to Richards, but then went in the reverse direction with this artwork by recording commuter movement through the station in very few pixels, giving the resulting image a soft, black-and-white appearance of abstraction.

On the other hand, Daniel Canogar's "Rise/Times Square, July 2014" invited people to crawl across a long, horizontal green screen, then projected the images onto buildings around the square. The outlines of some 1,200 participants scaling the massive structures remind Richards of King Kong scaling the Empire State Building.

In the version at Art House, the human outlines, sometimes in neon colors and other times simple white on black, crawl up a rectangular surface, sometimes clumping, sometimes alone, sometimes racing, sometimes slow.

"It feels not like a horde of humanity, but of the joy of humanity working together, human beings moving in concert with each other," Richards said.

That's countered by another work she finds somewhat disturbing: Alan Rath's "Wall Eye I" (1997) shows a roving eye looking, blinking, almost as if there's a human inside the box of wires, trying to escape from the machine. Then again, the notes on the piece say the artist was contemplating why people tend to construct robots with human-like expressive characteristics.

There's much more, including Daniel Rozin's "Mirror No. 12" (2013) that expresses what its camera sees in real time and space, presenting viewers in impressionistic strokes that make you want to gyrate and change position to generate new visual interpretations.

The exhibit will be on display through next spring. You might want to stop by more than once, since many of the moving images change over time and may present a different view each time you stop by.

If you go
WHAT: "Mouse in the Machine: Nature in the Age of Digital Art"
WHEN: Opening reception 5-7 p.m. Saturday, runs through spring 2017
WHERE: Art House, 231 Delgado St.
GALLERY HOURS: Thursday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.
COST: Free