

ART REVIEW

Making (Brain) Waves

Neuroscience Meets Art at a Westport Exhibition

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

As daunting as the exhibition "Neuroculture: Visual Art and the Brain" at the Westport Arts Center sounds, it is the kind of theme show that, along with a little wall label and catalog reading, repays conscientious viewing. Overly academic, yes; tedious and dull, no.

"Neuroculture" is the latest in a new series of intelligent theme-oriented exhibitions at the arts center, each of them organized by a curator or other specialist.

It is probably a tad too esoteric for most visitors, but it is great to see this level of commitment to serious curatorial projects on the part of a small regional art center. I think it is heroic.

The exhibition was arranged by Suzanne Anker, a well-known art theorist, and Gio-

Scientists and artists look into the mind using imaging and imagery.

vanni Frazzetto, a neuroscientist. Both have contributed artwork to the show, as have Fred Tomaselli, Andrew Carnie, Frank Gillette, Steve Miller, Michael Rees and several others.

Inherent here is a paradox: Neuroscience involves the study of nerves and nerve tissue in the brain and their relation to behavior and learning. In short, it deals with largely invisible microscopic electrical impulses. Visual art is about picturing things.

How, then, can you picture the invisible?

The exhibition presents a kind of aesthetic and sociological report on the human brain, inarguably a rich and fascinating subject. Some of the artists try to picture consciousness, even memory, while others invite us simply to look at the human mind in different ways. Others, again, are interested in the impact of neuroscience on society.

This may all be interesting, but how much of the work turns out to be half-decent art?

Frankly not a lot, although there is much here to mull and argue over, not the least of which is the advancing scientific understanding of the general conditions of creativity.

New imaging technologies are at the forefront of these advances (M.R.I., PET and CT scans), and perhaps not surprisingly several artists employ them in their work. Most obviously, Mr. Gillette presents some digitally distorted brain scans, although they are weird beyond anything that can reasonably be savored as just bad taste.

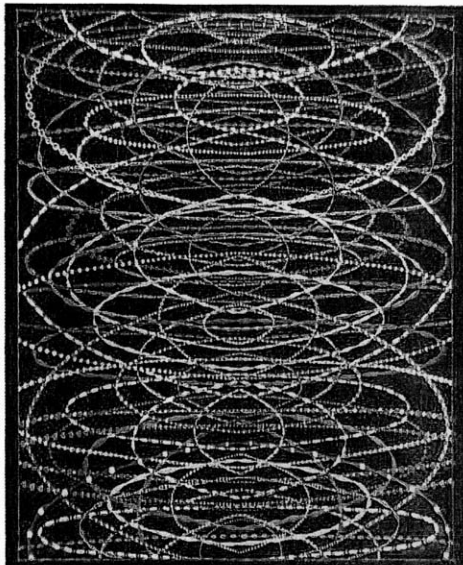
More appealing is Mr. Carnie's slide installation, "Magic Forest" (2002). In a darkened room, using slides and scrim, the artist scales up and simulates the process of neuronal firing, which neuroscientists have recently been able to track using advanced imaging technology. Here we are watching the brain in action, or thinking in progress.

Then there are artists who approach the theme metaphorically. One is Buhm Hong, whose photographs refer abstractly to the neural processing of memories. His images depict little sparks of light floating in a cavernous blackness. They are quite moving and affecting, and were the artworks I lingered over the longest.

Equally abstract, Alan Scarritt's photographs (images produced without a camera by placing an object on photosensitive paper and exposing it to light) also intrigue and excite. Here the artist's fingers set into motion flowing wave patterns in water, which are somehow captured on film. The final images conjure all kinds of things in your head — a bit like Rorschach test cards. I was seeing tiger heads.

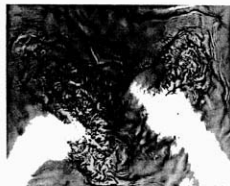
Also pleasant enough to look at, but sort out of place, are a bunch of Mr. Tomaselli's colorful prints of pills arranged in dizzying patterns. According to the essay in the exhibition catalog, the artist's use of the pills "make reference to drugs, as means and methods for altering consciousness." Yeah, sure, but how exactly does that relate to the theme? This feels a lot like curatorial over-reaching.

Near the entrance are a bunch of Mary Ann Strandell's three-dimensional lenticular prints, which hark back to 1960's optical art. More catalog blather ties them to LSD

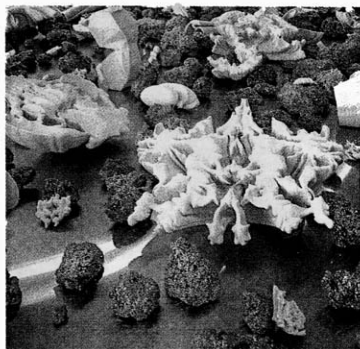


James Cohan Gallery

On view at the West Arts Center, clockwork from left: "After Echolocation #2" by Tomaselli; "Swirl 1" by Mary Ann Strandell; "Origins of Consciousness," a sculpture by Suzani Anker; and "Untitled Photogram" by Alan Scarritt.



Alan Scarritt



and the hippie generation, but I can't see anything in their changing light and colors beyond a standard optical trip.

Fooling the eye is not the same thing as fooling the mind.

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"Neuroculture: Visual Art and the Brain" at the Westport Arts Center, 51 Riverside Avenue, Westport, through May 25. Information: (203) 222-7070 or on the Web at www.westportartscenter.org.