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Don't adjust your computer monitor: Electrical engineer/artist incorporates movement and memory in his work

The works in a retrospective by digital artist Jim Campbell intentionally defy viewers' expectations.

By [Mike Allen](#)

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Conveying the effect of Jim Campbell's art is a challenge on the printed page.

The San Francisco-based artist with a background in electrical engineering creates artistic contraptions that incorporate movement and memory, and experiment with how little visual information is needed for a viewer to have an emotional reaction to an image.

In a series he refers to as "Ambiguous Icons," which uses light-emitting diode displays he designed himself that hang against a wall like paintings, Campbell reduces footage of people in motion to extremely low resolution and projects the image onto a still photograph or blank surface.

Considered a pioneer of digital art, the 54-year-old double-majored in engineering and mathematics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His work has been displayed in places as far away as Germany and Taiwan. He has pieces in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Now, art curators at Roanoke College and Hollins University have collaborated to bring a 20-year retrospective of Campbell's work to the region. Olin Hall Galleries at Roanoke College and the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins will each showcase a portion of "Jim Campbell: In the Repose of Memory," marking the first time the two institutions have worked together in this way.

The dual exhibits open Thursday with a lecture by the artist at 5:30 p.m. at Roanoke College's Theatre Hall, followed by a reception at the Wilson Museum. The Commonwealth Coach & Trolley Museum will provide bus transportation between the two venues.

Future events tied to the exhibit involve collaborations with the School of Visual Arts at Virginia Tech and The Shadowbox Cinema in downtown Roanoke.

Tinkering with focus

Wilson Museum Executive Director Amy Moorefield and Olin Galleries Director Talia Logan wanted to work with Campbell in part because they feel that digital art is underrepresented in the Roanoke Valley.

Moorefield worked with Campbell on a show 10 years ago, when she was assistant director the Anderson Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. She's called Campbell a "rock star" in the art world, though Campbell disputes that term, asserting that he's known in digital art circles mainly because he's been at it since the late 1980s.

He started, he said, with interactive art.

One of his earliest digital works used a video camera, and when viewers approached, they saw images of themselves that made it appear as if they were on fire. His purpose had been to give onlookers a sense of what it

might be like to be mentally ill, as a way of raising awareness of how society treats those with mental illness -- but he found patrons tended to respond as if the device were a fun-house mirror.

His frustration with those experiences led him to create works that defied viewer expectations, that went out of focus when someone approached them. Then he began tinkering with ways to convey personal or emotional information using the most basic objects and images in ways that still were animated but no longer interactive.

He called these objects "Memory Works," some of which will be on display at Olin Galleries.

For example, "I Have Never Read the Bible" displays a book mounted on the wall, and from it a voice spells every word in the King James Bible. "Typing Paper" appears to be a single sheet of paper in a glass case, from which one can hear the sound of typing on an old manual typewriter. The document being typed is Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

"You're not hearing the speech," Campbell said in a recent interview. "You're hearing the speech being typed out. Are you going to have an emotional response to that? And I didn't know whether one would or not. When I created the work, it was kind of an experiment."

The Olin Galleries also will hold samples from his "Illuminated Average" series, in which every frame of a movie such as "Psycho" or "The Wizard of Oz" is superimposed to create one image. He came up with the approach because, "I became interested in taking time and compressing it," he said.

Playing with figures

Since Campbell began creating the series in 2000, many others have produced similar works.

Campbell noted that images that produce the same effect could have been done decades ago, but it's only with the proliferation of the computer in popular culture that people have begun to think of images as data and manipulate them in that manner.

"Once you think about it as data, then what are you going to do with it? You're going to treat it like data. You're going to average it or you're going to treat it in other ways. That's very different than how one dealt with photography," he said.

Campbell's low-resolution projections also result from treating film like data. His term for them, "Ambiguous Icons," is intended to be an oxymoron. Computer icons, which are small and low-resolution, all point to very specific programs or files.

"One never feels any emotion by looking at an icon on a computer screen," Campbell said. He wanted to explore whether an image with as little information and as few pixels as a computer icon could cause some sort of visceral response in a person.

This led to the creation of the series, examples of which will be on display at both Roanoke College and Hollins.

"Figures work very well at that low resolution," he said. "It's such a primal part of our brain in terms of how we perceive human movement. If you're going to work with an image and you want to make it minimal, use a face, or use a figure. We're hard-wired for recognizing faces and figures."

Campbell's largest work of this kind will open in New York's Madison Square Park in late October. A 50-foot-wide, 20-foot-high and 16-foot-deep 3-D grid of 2,000 hanging LEDs, called "Scattered Light," from a distance shows footage of commuters walking in all directions through Grand Central Station.

"What's fun about it is that they're not going at right angles to each other. They're basically walking at every

angle because it's one big room," Campbell said. "That goes with the concept of the work in a way, which is this randomized explosion."

Campbell said there isn't a particular response he's seeking with any of these works. How an onlooker fills in the gaps in visual information is up to them.

"I'm one of those artists that don't believe art should be designed for an audience," he said. "It's almost more like science."

And yet the reception of his "exploded images" has been positive.

"I've been doing this 10 years. I've been doing it too long. I am kind of a little stuck in it." But he sticks to it because "clearly the feedback is good. People do feel something from these works."

For a visual explanation of Campbell's work, go online at tiny.cc/CampbellArt

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