

The Washington Post

'Watch This!' at Smithsonian's American Art Museum worth a look

By Michael O'Sullivan

Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, December 16, 2010; 10:15 AM

For fans of video art, Christmas came early this year. Just last week, the [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#) joined a growing list of institutions that have opened dedicated long-term galleries exclusively for media art, also known as time-based media. The inaugural installation of "[Watch This! New Directions in the Art of the Moving Image](#)" features nine artworks, spanning 40 years of history and spotlighting technology as disparate as a digital animation in 3-D projection - the kind you look at through cheesy paper glasses with red and blue lenses - to an array of 1,782 twinkling LEDs controlled by customized electronic circuitry.

It's worth a visit, even if you're one of those who aren't convinced that videos are art. Maybe especially if you're one of those who aren't convinced that videos are art. (The [Hirshhorn Museum](#) and Sculpture Garden's Black Box theater, now an astonishing five years old, can't do it alone.)

John Hanhardt, SAAM's consulting senior curator for media arts, selected the works in the show, which range from pioneering video artist Nam June Paik's "9/23/69: Experiment With David Atwood" (shown in a restored vintage television) to Cory Arcangel's 2008 "Video Painting," recorded on VHS tape - yes, you read that right - and projected onto a nearby wall, which it almost fills. True to its name, Arcangel's monumental, though not especially painterly, work appears at one point inside a giant gold frame.

Watching both Paik's and Arcangel's work, you'll understand why this stuff is called time-based media. The running time for Paik's video? A whopping 80 minutes; Arcangel's is two hours. Don't be put off by that though. You're not meant to sit down and watch either in its entirety. Hanhardt says he created the space to be inviting (it is), as well as a place visitors will want to return to. And you very likely will - if not not to catch parts of videos you missed, then to check out new additions. The museum plans to swap out pieces from time to time, making "Watch This!" a rotating showcase for videos new and old.

Among the standouts here are two works by Jim Campbell.

If you've traveled recently between the National Gallery of Art's East and West buildings on its underground moving walkway, you've no doubt seen artist Leo Villareal's "Multiverse," featuring approximately 41,000 LEDs in a trippy moving light show. Campbell works with the same technology, but on a much smaller scale. And his evocative pictures - for it's not exactly accurate to call them videos - are arguably more powerful than Villareal's.

Campbell's "Grand Central Station #2" features a photograph of an empty train-station concourse. We see the floor, interrupted only by a stray newspaper someone has dropped. But because that photograph is printed on a kind of plastic transparency, like a light box, we also see, underneath, 1,782 LEDs programmed to flash on and off in such a way that it looks like people - or, more accurately, their shadows - are walking across the concourse.

The effect is ghostly, like looking at an old still photograph whose subjects have died, or otherwise moved on. Campbell's other piece, "Reconstruction #7," is a street scene featuring spectral pedestrians.

Together, these works offer beautiful commentary on the transitory nature of life. They give new meaning to term moving pictures.

osullivanm@washpost.com WATCH THIS! NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE ART OF THE MOVING IMAGE On long-term view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Eighth and F streets NW (Metro: Gallery Place). 202-633-1000 (TDD: 202-633-5285). www.americanart.si.edu. Hours: Open daily 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Admission: Free.