

# Startling sights await in holography museum

By F.N. D'ALESSIO

The Associated Press

CHICAGO — Columnist Mike Royko died in 1997, so it is a bit disconcerting to see him in a darkened room, slowly turning around inside a Plexiglas cylinder.

He is in full color and somehow insubstantial, so he's not a statue; but his monumental nose is there in all its three-dimensional glory, so he can't be a photograph, either.

Suddenly, Royko breaks into a grin — and disappears.

He is a type of hologram, says Loren Billings, curator and executive director of the Museum of Holography.

"Artist Sharon McCormack had Mike stand on a revolving platform and photographed him with a movie camera," she explains. "Then the individual frames were transferred holographically to a strip of diffraction grating. That's what's revolving inside the display case. You look through the diffraction grating and see Mike inside."

Michael Jordan is in another cylinder a few feet away, also grinning. He executes a tricky move by passing the basketball behind his back, and continues doing so endlessly.

In the same room with the tiny Royko and Jordan are some large-scale traditional holograms by New Jersey artist John Perry. In one of them, a shark seems to be swimming out of its picture frame and a huge red hand reaches for — and finally grasps — the frayed end of a rope dangling in front of it.

In another room, Perry has holograms of a full-sized Tyrannosaurus rex skull and a tarantula blown up to the size of a basset hound. He also has a work in which a painter reaches out from inside a picture frame with two brushes and seemingly smears swathes of red and yellow paint in the air in front of the viewer.

Some of the images by other artists are a bit disturbing, like the green woman who smiles, and then spews glass shards out of her mouth, toward the visitor.

But none of it bothers Billings, who has been in charge of the museum since its founding 25 years ago.

As one of the city's lesser known cultural institutions, it has only an unassuming sign in

## If you go

**WHAT:** Museum of Holography

**WHERE:** 1134 W. Washington Blvd., Chicago

**HOURS:** 12:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays

**ADMISSION:** \$4

front and is almost hidden in a former warehouse district about a mile west of the Loop. In recent years, though, the stream of visitors to Oprah Winfrey's nearby Harpo Studios has brought increased walk-in business to Billings' odd gallery.

"We're the only not-for-profit museum of holography in the United States — perhaps the world," she says. "We also run a school of holography right here in the building. Some of our students are artists, and others are physicists and biologists from local universities."

Some of the student works are mixed in among the small uncredited holograms hanging on the walls near the museum's reception desk. If you stop there, you might leave with the mistaken impression that holographic art consists of nothing but kitsch, or "gee-whiz" technological stunts. There are super-realistic pictures of fluffy kittens and puppies, and quite a few images of grinning skulls and "Star Trek" aliens. The gee-whiz holograms include ghostly telescopes, microscopes and binoculars that the viewer can actually look "through."

In the galleries themselves, though, the artistic quality of the work is higher. "Tony in Training," a straightforward portrait of a bodybuilder by Ron and Bernadette Olsen of San Francisco, is particularly arresting, and seems to bulge out of the glass surface. Like many holographic portraits, it seems to be more real and more still than a traditional photograph.

"A portrait like this is done with a laser burst only 25 nanoseconds long," Billings said. "A nanosecond, remember, is only a billionth of a second."

Some works even offer social commentary. "Further Threats," by Mary Harman, appears at first to be merely a simple collage of newspaper articles and black paint. As the visitor bends closer to look at the articles about Serbian aggression, a flood in Bangladesh and AIDS in Malaysia, tiny clay figurines in

agonized positions burst through the newsprint surface, creating a double image.

The museum devotes one small room to the still lives of the late Art Freund, a physicist and holographic pioneer who worked first in Chicago and later at Santa Cruz, Calif.

The museum's final gallery features a temporary show on medical uses of holography, as both a diagnostic and teaching aid. Some of the works on display are by the museum school's director, Dr. Ted Niemiec, a Chicago obstetrician. Individual bones and organs rotate slowly in Niemiec's holograms, seemingly suspended in empty space.