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The ARTS

'Wow, cool' describe art's future

By Rick Kogan

Like many great treasures, this one is buried on Washington west of the Loop. It is a unique treasure, reputedly the only museum in the world devoted to the art and science of holography.

"It is the future," says Loren Billings, founder and executive director of the Museum of Fine Arts Research and Holographic Center [1134 W. Washington St. 226-1007], as she lets us in the front door. "This is the 21st Century."

Billings saw her first hologram 14 years ago at the Art Institute, "a very simple thing, a light bulb .... But it was incredible." And thus was the sprawling former Free Methodist Publishing building transformed into this house of holography. It opened in 1976 and in addition to the public galleries, the building houses workshops, research facilities and a school that has taught more than 800 people the art and science of holography.

"Holograms are ... " we said.

Billings didn't answer. Instead she led us into a small room and stood silently smiling. There in our face was a small green horse that appeared to be galloping from its frame. We turned to face Mickey Mouse, also green and also popping from the wall. We looked at Billings. She nodded. Lining the walls were all sorts of framed wonders: A faucet, an apple, Minerva's head—all bright green and all three-dimensional.

"Wow," we said.

"That's what all the kids say when they come here," said Billings. "'Wow' and 'Cool'."

Simply put, "a holgram is a recording on a light-sensitive medium of the light waves that reflect from an object illuminated with laser light, forming in complete and full dimension an image of that original object."

But that scientific explanation mattered little as we took our hand and put it through, or seemingly through, the horse's head. To see a hologram is to experience wonder. It is a feeling probably much like that experienced more than a century ago by one seeing an early photographic image: Magic.

"We are the pioneers," Billings said. "Holography is in its earliest stages [the first hologram was produced in 1948 by Dr. Dennis Gabor, but they weren't considered practical until the invention of the laser in 1960]. We are here to spread the gospel."

That is not a simple task. Like anything new, holography is sometimes viewed with skepticism, or ignored. Some view it as a technological novelty, an artistic oddity. The problem is that not enough people actually *view* it. Though the museum's guest book bulges with the names of many visitors [it is open Wednesday-Sunday from 12:30 p.m.-5 p.m.], some important folks—from the Illinois Arts Council or the city's Office of Fine Arts—have never visited.

"Not one of the organizations to which I've applied for a grant has ever sent a representative to visit the museum," said Billings.

And that is the only way to understand the power and potential of holography. In the larger of the museum's two gallery spaces—the horse, Mickey Mouse and their green pals rest in the other—the holograms are more sophisticated, technically and artistically, and thus more awe-inspiring. The centerpieces of this serene, wood-paneled room are two works by Rudie Berkhout, "91F" [a splash of colored orbs floating in space] and "The New Territories" [an undulating, otherworldly landscape], but we are taken with—and still haunted by—a work called "Hostess," a blond woman's face of amazing detail and special beauty.

"There are only a handful of holographic artists," said Billings. And when she explained the cost of lasers—tens of thousands of dollars—it wasn't hard to understand why.

Most of the 40 works on exhibit are for sale, though commercialism is not at all present in their presentation. The rough price range is $500-$7,000 and the only thing necessary for displaying a hologram in one's own home is a "movie projector light bulb."

"Not many people buy the larger works for themselves," said Billings. She has a number of corporate clients who use holgrams in advertisments. And Billings envisions the day when holograms will be a normal part of our daily lives. Look now at the small bird, or the globe on your credit card. See how, when it catches light, it takes on a three-dimensional quality?

"I am astonished at the advances being made," said Billings. "There are so many applications for physicists, engineers, industry and medicine. And art."

After a few hours, we left this laser Louvre and walked to the car. We have seen the future, we thought. "Wow *and* cool," we said out loud.

Illustration by Mitch O'Connell