



A big red shark that seems to leap off its screen is among the holographic images that intrigue visitors to the Museum of Holography.

OUT THERE / A SLICE OF CHICAGO

# Realm of magic illusions

By Nara Schoenberg

Tribune staff reporter

I'm buzzed into a turn-of-the-century building and greeted by a cat named Charcoal, who reclines on a pedestal just beyond the threshold.

A small, slender woman descends the stairs and ushers me into a room with polished wood paneling, high ceilings and dozens of glowing panels in bright green, dull yellow and candied-apple red. I move closer and see a pear, a monkey, a face of Albert Einstein, all optical illusions, all formed by lasers beams of light.

"It's all about particle physics," the woman says. She's enthusiastic but somehow otherworldly: delicate, with fine features and almost translucent skin. She wears a pale, flowing shirt over pale pants and pale shoes. Her blond hair is so light it almost seems white.

Her name is Loren Billings, and she is the founder and executive director of the 24-year-old Museum of Holography. During a tour of the premises she speaks passionately of physics and art, the remarkable properties of light waves

and the wonders of the universe.

"Our planet is like an island in the sky that feeds off the borrowed energy of sunlight," she says.

Her voice is mesmerizing, her gaze intense. She speaks of the future, of the school children who come here, bursting with curiosity, ready to meet the big red shark that seems to leap off its screen, the miniature Michael Jordan who flashes a smile as he spins through time and space.

She wants to inspire children to learn more about science, she says, to feel the lure of astrophysics, perhaps, to unravel the mysteries of light.

"I don't drink. I don't smoke. The world doesn't interest me that much. I'm sort of in the stars as opposed to down on earth," she says, turning to her cat. "But we all have our duty, don't we Charcoal?"

Billings, a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago, found her calling after studying holography with a physicist friend, becoming fascinated and discovering that others shared her fascination. The museum, which she says is the

only such institution in the country, flowed from there.

"You dabble here, you dabble there, and all of it synthesizes [into] what you want to do."

Today, the museum has 250 holograms on display, from a smirking Mike Royko who turns into a female fortuneteller to lion cubs so fluffy you want to reach out and pat them on the head. A highlight is the remarkable medical room, where the vessels from the lungs form what looks like a shimmering green tree.

Here you see the inside of an eye, the intricate texture of colon cancer, the interior of the larynx exposed like an exotic flower.

Billing introduces such sights with a proprietary air and a hint of childlike wonder.

The shark always amazes her youngest visitors, she says.

"It amazes me. I work [here], and it amazes me."

*The Museum of Holography, 1134 W. Washington Blvd., is open Wednesday through Sunday, from 12:30 to 5 p.m. Admission is \$4 for adults, \$3 for children, and free for children under six. Call 312-226-1007.*