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Review Remembering the early computer-generated art of Stan VanDerBeek

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Installation view of Stan VanDerBeek's "Poemfield" at The Box. (Courtesy of the Estate of Stan VanDerBeek Estate and The Box, LA / Photo by: Jason Underhill)

With the rise of nostalgia for 8-bit video games and the “New Aesthetic” celebrating the look of digital technologies, it’s a perfect time to revisit the work of Stan VanDerBeek, a pioneer in the field of computer-generated art.

Eight dazzling examples of his animated films are at the center of a stellar exhibition at The Box. It also features xerograph prints (an early kind of photocopy), watercolors and archival material, including a stack of seemingly ancient punch cards.



Educated as a painter, VanDerBeek, who died in 1984, worked with programmer Ken Knowlton at Bell Labs in the late 1960s using Knowlton's computer animation language BEFLIX (Bell Labs Flicks) to create innovative abstract animations.

The collaboration was facilitated by EAT (Experimental Art and Technology), an organization founded by Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman, among others. VanDerBeek went on to create work at MIT and NASA, continuing his investigations into human-computer interaction and its possibilities for creating art.

Five of the works VanDerBeek completed at Bell Labs are on view as large projections in the main gallery; three others can be seen on small monitors throughout the rest of the space. All have been transferred from their original format on 16 mm film. Some have soundtracks by the likes of John Cage and Paul Motian, but unfortunately the sonic aspects are all but lost, overlapping into cacophony.

Still, the visuals are rich enough to stand on their own. The projections in the main gallery are all titled "Poemfield" and are based on VanDerBeek's spare, evocative poetry.

The films are highly colored, featuring all-over textures or mandala-like forms. The words are often parsed out one at time, accompanied by geometric shapes or washes of pixels that build and repeat or simply sweep the words away in a cascade of pattern.

In "Poemfield No. 3," VanDerBeek superimposed computer-generated graphics onto live footage of skydivers for a surreal, surprisingly moving meditation on free-fall.

"Poemfield No. 2" recalls somewhat the maze structure of a Pac-Man game, only more detailed and textured. One quickly grasps the computer's predisposition (or is it ours?) for dizzyingly complex, fractal-like patterns that spiral across the screen only to dissolve quickly into nothing.

It's also easy to see the roots of current CGI technologies, in which computers are key to animating hordes of monsters or robots or spacecraft. The visual intricacy of today's



digital aesthetics harks back to these early experiments with their swarming, buzzing pixels. (If you have any kind of sensitivity to strobes or quickly flashing lights, this is not the show for you.)

Yet, in VanDerBeeks' work there is something warm and funny and gracious and open that doesn't appear in many of today's overwrought Hollywood productions. In his animations we see the nascent power of computing and its bent toward order, systems and repeatability (a bent that dovetails nicely with systems-driven artwork of the same period).

But we also catch a glimpse of what he saw: the computer as a wondrous extension of the human brain, a tool that doesn't have a mind of its own, but reflects our thinking back to us.

The Box, 805 Traction Ave., (213) 625-1747, through Oct. 15. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays. www.theboxla.com

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