New York

The Whitney's Digital Sampler

Tech-savvy artists are painting with keyboards, sculpting with software, and avoiding natural light -- it interferes with their plasma screens. Now they're being welcomed by the Whitney Museum. Can they bring the art world up to code?

By **Steve Bodow**

On Little Italy's Western edge, on the twelfth and top floor of a yellowed twenties office building, Jeremy Blake is entertaining a Very Important Person. Greeting his guest, Blake navigates around a computer workstation, a diminutive combo TV-VCR, and an equipment-strewn desk. The room's only real highlight is a small orange vinyl divan, which the lanky, dark-haired 29-year-old artist offers his visitor. Something moves Blake to pardon his studio's relative plainness. "People come expecting to see a lot of bells and whistles and lights and buzzers," he says, "but it's just a couple of Macs."

Apology unnecessary: The Macintoshes are what the VIP has come to see. Blake, a CalArts graduate with a master's in painting, has been working mostly on a computer for nearly five years. He's met with considerable success, showing what his dealer calls "digital paintings" around New York and in a few European museums.

Now he's deep in the middle of working on *Station to Station* -- his most ambitious piece yet -- for the Whitney Museum of American Art. Today's visitor is the Whitney's newest contemporary-art curator, Larry Rinder.

Ultimately, *Station to Station* will appear on five adjacent 50-inch plasma screens mounted on the Whitney's walls just like paintings. For now, though, Blake has prepared an elaborate demo on one of his Macs. He's based the piece on something he saw painted on a bank of lockers in a Tokyo subway -- a mural of a modernist office building in a grassy corporate park. He clicks a play button. As the building's windows shimmer and gradually change colors, some of the locker doors slide open, like portals on the Starship *Enterprise*. The mural disintegrates, revealing a more abstract stained-glassy world within the lockers. Indiglo-toned mist -- mountain fog? Terrorist nerve gas? -- seeps from behind the wall. The fumes make a startling hissing sound from previously unseen speakers. Eventually, the peaceful mural reemerges, and we're back in front of the subway lockers. But whatever we thought we might have been looking at is now tainted with an air of instability, even danger.

Rinder coos at the screen shots and transitions -- "interesting," "great," "beautiful" -- then turns the conversation to what kind of seating to put in front of the wall where the piece will hang. Left unresolved is how the museum will describe the work. It certainly isn't a painting -- paintings don't have play buttons. Video art? But there's no camera. Perhaps it's virtual architecture. Or . . .

Actually, Blake's work is all those and none of them. But the real point is that categories don't matter -- at its best, digital art is making them obsolete. "When I was painting, I was envious of other media -- I never wanted to be part of a club that would have me," says Blake, who looks a bit like Quentin Tarantino without the pug scowl. "I like to hang out with musicians; I like that culture's immediacy. I love film, but making a film was not practical as a 24-year-old with no money. Doing something with a computer was." Working digital, he says, lets him "get the

most out of everything I think is interesting."

"Five years ago, most digital artists were geek artists, whereas now it's artists who are really good with technology."

Digital artists are about to break down another boundary: the one between them and the art world's upper echelons. The Whitney's "BitStreams" exhibition, which opens March 22, is the first show devoted to such work at a major New York museum. Almost simultaneously, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has opened "010101: Art in Technological Times" -- an even broader survey of tech-influenced artwork. Downtown, a new media-arts umbrella organization called Eyebeam Atelier is raising $40 million for a new 90,000-square-foot art-and-technology museum set to come online, as it were, in Chelsea in 2004. And after several years of mainly watching from the sidelines, more New York galleries are showing -- and even selling -- digital work. "It's finally beginning seriously to infiltrate the collector system," says Sandra Gering, a dealer who has been representing new-media artists since 1993.

"It's astonishing how much work out there has been touched by or embodies digital technology," says Rinder, his eyes growing wide with appetite. "It's like the genetically manipulated corn thing -- what food isn't it in?"

In the wake of the dot-com bust, art that involves technology might sound like a trend that should have crested a year ago. But experts say it just needed time to grow up. "Digital art is like soccer -- it never attracted the best athletes until this generation," asserts Mark Tribe, founder of the pioneering art site Rhizome. "A huge amount of talent is now pouring into this league. Five years ago, most digital artists were geek artists, whereas now it's artists who are really good with technology."

Museum professionals are getting better with it, too: Like most everyone else, almost every curator and foundation officer in the country is now at least conversant with computers. "As a practical matter," Tribe says, "we've reached a tipping point."

Now that they've seen the glowing blue light, no one in the museum world wants to be caught missing the Next Big Thing. The Museum of Modern Art's Barbara London, an associate curator who specializes in new media, says the country's major contemporary-art institutions are making long-term commitments to supporting digital artists. "We're all taking it on in a bigger way," she says. "Digital's not going away."

For the Whitney, recent history has raised the stakes somewhat. Its former director David Ross is widely recognized as a tech-art visionary, having made his reputation with early and vociferous support of both video and Internet art. He left his Madison Avenue perch in 1998 to head sfmoma, taking Intel, which spent $6 million sponsoring Ross's two-part blockbuster "American Century" show, along with him. In terms of making the Whitney a haven for art and technology, Ross left his successor, Maxwell Anderson, with a tough act to follow. "It's been interesting to see Max Anderson position himself as David's competitor in terms of support for digital art," observes Andrea Scott, a critic and consultant who has worked on both coasts. "It is not a coincidence 'BitStreams' is happening when it is."

"It's not that we hope to be first," Anderson retorts coolly. "I assumed that '010101' would be opening on 01/01/01." (The sfmoma show's online component did in fact launch New Year's Day.) The Whitney's goal, he maintains, is simply to support emerging artists. "We like to crack open the egg before it's boiled."

Anderson has certainly had a longstanding interest in the Net, partly for its practical potential. Until recently, he seems to have focused most of his tech energies on projects like Web-based image banks and the Art Museum Network site. As far as actually showing digital work, though, the pieces in the group-curated 2000 Biennial marked a turning point. For one thing, a star emerged: Paul Pfeiffer, whose digital-video loops of Knicks forward Larry Johnson and a couch-humping Tom Cruise (sampled from *Risky Business*) earned him the first-ever Bucksbaum Award, a $100,000 best-in-show prize. Among those instrumental in picking new-media artists for the Biennial was Larry Rinder, then based in the Bay Area, whom Anderson hired full-time shortly before the show opened. It was a neat (if inadvertent) quid pro quo: David Ross had tapped longtime New York curator Benjamin Weil as sfmoma's new-media man a few months earlier.

Transferring east last June, Rinder, 39, was given just nine months to assemble "BitStreams," his true New York debut. (By contrast, "010101" was twice as long in the making.) Aided by associate curator Debra Singer, who chose the exhibition's portfolio of two dozen audio artists -- and by the traditional Whitney stricture that he show only American work -- Rinder sought out painting, photography, video, sculpture, installations, and assorted hybrids thereof. Everything was fair game as long as it in some way resonated with "the conditions of life in a digital age," says the curator: "It's not enough to prostrate before technology, or recoil from it in horror." Instead, he preferred an informed ambivalence.

Among his picks: Jon Haddock's "Screenshots," which depict important historical events like Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in the banal style of a SimCity game. In addition to "John 3:16," the companion to his Biennial basketball video, Paul Pfeiffer will debut "Prologue to the Story of the Birth of Freedom," a two-screen piece featuring a slyly altered version of Cecil B. DeMille's cameo in *The Ten Commandments*. Sculptor Robert Lazzarini uses 3-D modeling software to radically reshape iconic objects, including skulls, into arrestingly unfamiliar forms. "Each one is about the size of a real skull, except that their shapes are the result of compound distortions developed in a CAD file," Rinder explains. "The digital image is 'printed out' as a rapid prototype" -- a solid object of moldable resin -- "which is then used as a model for the final sculptures, which are made of real bone." Not all the art is visual: In a bank of headphones set up to feature audio art, John Hudak offers digitally enhanced, subtly hallucinatory field recordings of what turns out to be a rural pond. And Marina Rosenfeld's mysterious sampled soundscapes betray a warm sense of humor beneath their steel-and-silicon surface.

Rosenfeld's work shares a playful nervousness with much of the art in "BitStreams." Above all, "BitStreams" artists seem to be talking about indeterminacy. Nothing, they're telling us, is as it seems -- a situation they find both intensely amusing and deeply unsettling. "When an artist manipulates a photograph and you can't even tell which part, that's plugging into broad-based cultural anxiety about digital technology, that this is all part of some big thing to control us," suggests Rinder. "The culture as a whole has become anxious about a slippage between real and manufactured, digital reality."

Of course, "manufacturing reality" is a fairly apt job description for any artist, which may explain why technology has drawn so many under its spell. Rinder points out that even established figures like David Hockney and self-described technophobe Chuck Close (neither of whose work is in the show) are working with digital media these days. It presents too many creative opportunities to ignore. "The fears I have about privacy or manipulation are so vague and undirected," one artist muses. "Maybe that's why I want to do this work to begin with, to gain some mastery of this technology."

Then again, artists' uneasy excitement about the effects of digital media may turn out to be just an early reaction to the shock of the new. In ten years, questions about what part of a work is "really real" may be no more interesting than whether a painting is oil or acrylic.

"I didn't want to become an executive at a dot-com. I was always thinking, 'What kind of art can I make while I'm here?'"

A few doors toward the East River from Peter Luger Steak House, John Klima is living like a New York artist mythically should: in a cheap, wide-open, walk-up loft overflowing with current projects, used coffee cups, and a big, friendly mutt. His windows would look onto the Williamsburg Bridge and bathe the room in cool northern light -- if he hadn't covered them with a black tarpaulin so he can use his late-model digital video projector around the clock. Next to it, literally on a pedestal, sits a vintage 1981 TRS-80, the Radio Shack personal computer on which so many thirtysomething geeks cut their teeth.

"When I was 15, we got that Trash-80 and I learned programming, but then I got interested in girls, so I went to art school," Klima recounts in a squeak-prone voice that evokes Emo Philips. The sandy-haired 35-year-old is busily working a video-game controller to push and twist the virtual levers on an animated tourmaline orb that's being projected onto a small movie screen. This is how one plays "GlasBead," his Web-based virtual musical instrument. (Like many other lifelong gamers, he can easily play and conduct a thoughtful conversation at the same time.) After suny Purchase, he says, he did hardly any computer work for several years, instead kicking around the country and designing furniture to pay the bills. He landed in Seattle in the mid-nineties and, needing cash, logged back into his techie side, taught himself some new languages on a 286, and scored a freelance coding gig with Microsoft: "With that on my résumé, I realized I could get a job anywhere, so I moved back to New York." About a year later, he took a consulting job at Dun & Bradstreet, "twenty hours a week for crazy money," he says with a grin, "so I took it and used the other twenty hours a week to make art."

At "BitStreams," Klima will show *Ecosystm,* a dynamic 3-D simulation program that uses real-time financial and weather data from CNN and Yahoo! to control the behavior of virtual birds, trees, and other "natural" objects. A surging Swiss franc might result in, say, a growing flock of orange gulls, while the currency's volatility would determine how tightly the birds stay in formation. *Ecosystm'*s relatively crude graphics won't soon be confused with a Pixar movie, and at first the way the piece harnesses an entire "world" to financial data seems almost willfully dorky. But it's also an incisive comment on the market's resemblance to video games, or the information-age tendency to interpret everything, even natural phenomena, in upticks and downticks.

Ecosystm also illustrates one of the most unusual issues surrounding digital art. In the end, what Klima created -- and was paid more than $14,000 for -- was a few thousand lines of code. The piece was commissioned by Zurich Capital Markets, an asset management firm whose New York chief, Randall Kau, decided he wanted to buy art that reflected a world in constant flux. Klima devised *Ecosystm* as a custom recreational-software package that Kau had installed on a giant plasma screen in the firm's kitchen, where traders now use it to blow off steam during breaks. (Users can steer around *Ecosystm's* animated planet, checking out various global markets as they fly.) The collaboration was a fruitful one: "It was ZCM's idea to use volatility numbers," Klima says. "And it was a good excuse to write a flocking algorithm, which is something I always wanted to do." Who wouldn't?

Klima heartily defends programming as every bit as legitimate an art form as drawing or painting. "Writing code is similar to making fine furniture -- your hand, your style, matters," he argues. Might art connoisseurship extend to the finer points of flight-path formulae? The brains behind "BitStreams" think Klima may be onto something. Sneakers, computers, and buildings conceived with the same off-the-rack Photoshop and Alias tricks do look more and more like one another's predictably curvilinear cousins. Says Rinder, "It is altogether possible that works made by artists who are writing their own code will stand out much as the handmade furniture of the Arts and Crafts artisans stood out from the industrially made furniture of their time."

ZCM's purchase remains exceptional. For the most part, hopes that New Economy fortunes would rain money onto tech art haven't panned out. This is partly because so much of that wealth has disintegrated, but there's still a lot of nerd money out there that just doesn't buy fine art. "You've got all these technology fortunes and very little involvement with them in the art scene," observes sfmoma's Benjamin Weil. "They haven't been enticed."

There's also the issue of what, exactly, a buyer of digital art gets. A meticulously boxed CD with a signed certificate? It's unlikely to be as satisfying as a painting you can see without having to boot up.

"My friends who make objects are such lucky bastards," says Leah Gilliam. Her "BitStreams" installation *Apeshit v3* combines computers, software, sound, and digitally distorted Super-8 *Planet of the Apes* trailer footage -- plus a small lawn of live sod. Short of finding a collector with an unusually green thumb, such work may be a tough sell.

But there's hope. Like many of her peers, the moma's Barbara London compares today's market for digital art to the one for video in the early seventies, when Bruce Nauman, Bill Viola, and Gary Hill could barely give their work away. Today Nauman's pieces routinely bring six figures at auction, and Matthew Barney sells limited-edition copies of his *Cremaster* videos for up to $300,000. "History repeats itself," says London. "People just need a little time to figure it out."

In fact, they've already started to. "Bitstreams" artist John F. Simon Jr.'s work has sold to sfmoma, the Whitney, and the Guggenheim. *CPU*, in which Simon reuses old PowerBook screens to display his software-driven drawings, sold out a limited edition at $5,000 each. His *ComplexCity,* a fantasy representation of New York that riffs on Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie,* started at $15,000 and most recently sold for $24,000. His dealer, Sandra Gering, has a 70-client waiting list for his next work. Jeremy Blake's C-print still-frame shots from his animations sell through Feigen Contemporary for around $8,000; DVD copies of his fully realized

"paintings," complete with sound and motion, command considerably more. Add in $15,000 more for a large-format plasma screen, and the cost of hanging a top-quality Blake above the mantel rises to well over $25,000. And that's before the Whitney puts its stamp on him.

Simon, Blake, and a few other earners are still the exceptions, of course. In digital art's nascent commercial terrain, even someone like John Klima still needs to make money, despite landing the occasional commission and regularly showing in galleries. (Currently at Postmasters Gallery on West 19th Street: *Go Fish,* a video game in which players who fail to steer a virtual goldfish through a 3-D maze cause a real goldfish to get flushed into a real tank of hungry predator fish. "Barbaric!" raves PETA.) Whenever he needs to pay bills, Klima just returns to the world of Wall Street coding. "It takes less time to do a $2,000 programming job than to apply for a $2,000 grant that you might not even get," he explains.

Needless to say, many digital artists supported themselves over the past few years with their programming or design skills, happily relieving dot-coms of their cash in the process. "Usually, someone who was 24 with, you know, a master's from CalArts wouldn't be very serious corporate material, but I was fortunate enough to get here during the Web boom," says Jeremy Blake. Just as the young Andy Warhol alchemized his commercial-illustration skills into his pioneering Pop, many artists who spent the nineties at mouse-and-keyboard day jobs have brought those familiar tools to their artwork. "I didn't want to become an executive at a dot-com and go public," says Blake. "I was always thinking, *What kind of art could I make while I'm here?*" The irony of his situation does not escape him. "While a lot of those companies are now leaving the building," he says with a grin, "I'm still around doing this oafish stuff I always wanted to do."

Some weeks after Larry Rinder's fly-by, Blake is still very much in the building, though to save money, he's moved his studio to a slightly more modest fourth-floor space. He's a little under the weather, having worked and reworked *Station to Station'*s images, tones, and pacing "nonstop since August." Sinking into the relocated orange couch, he sips a hot drink. "I thought the computer would increase the amount of work I could do," he laments, "but it's not the case." His piece has evolved into a slow-moving half-animated movie of his imagined Tokyo train station, with each frame, each luminous color, each dissolve and effect under his precise control.

As "BitStreams" draws near, Blake is feeling at the top of his game. "Interest in my work went way up after the millennium," he says. "Beforehand, we were supposed to be anxious about Y2K or something. But after" -- he glances at his Mac, eager to hit the keyboard -- "it's like people were given cultural permission to like new things." And then, this being software development, it's back to work.