

UCSD's University Art Gallery will show a virtual reality installation as part of the binational inSITE94 event

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Contact: Gerry McAllister, 619/534-2864 or Alixandra Williams, 619/534-3120

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Hitch a ride on a blood platelet. Sail through cyberspace in the back seat of a verb. Explore electronic identities. Fly through tiny capillaries and visit the far corners of the body.

It's all possible through a virtual reality art experience coming to the University of California, San Diego's University Art Gallery as part of inSITE94, a binational exhibition of some 75 installation and site-specific works by more than 100 artists, taking place at more than 40 sites in the San Diego/Tijuana region in September and October.

Called "Apparitions," the exhibition will be open from noon to 5 p.m., Sept. 23 to Oct. 30, except for Mondays when the University Art Gallery is closed. A public reception will take place at the gallery on Friday, Sept. 30, from 4:30-7 p.m.

The UCSD exhibit beckons gallery visitors to navigate through a three-dimensional, photo-realistic, computer generated virtual clinic whose architectural boundaries are confined only by the imaginations of their creators and the memory capacity of their computers.

In this virtual world, the user will be ushered through the clinic's corridors--stopping by the lab, imaging room, or the examination area as the clinic's staff (the computer program) deems necessary.

Once a viewer enters a room, reality breaks down. Suddenly, a person may become a blood sample and be subjected to a battery of tests. Or, one could wind up along the front lines of a beam of light, taking an evolutionary tour of imaging devices.

The virtual visit culminates at the doctor's office, a brush with medical authority and a wild trip through cyberspace, via the doctor's personal computer.

"Cyberspace is the realm of our electronic existence," said Sheldon Brown, Assistant Professor of Visual Art at UCSD and project director of 'Vital Signs,' the collective name for the 12 artists and computer programmers who created the exhibit.

"This exhibit is opening up questions about virtual reality, such as what type of territory the field is mapping, and how will people become part of it as the field coalesces."

Essentially, the virtual environment is a sophisticated computer simulation projected onto a large screen in the darkened art gallery. The program, driven by a Silicon Graphics Crimson (a high-powered graphics

computer), coupled with RealityEngine graphics (the computer's graphics design system), creates a vivid, real-time experience. The environment and objects in it were created with Alias Power Animator, a 3-D modeling and rendering software application that gives surfaces and textures a photo-realistic appearance, which are then scripted into a real-time interactive virtual reality, using Vital Signs' own virtual reality scripting software.

While the user navigates through the environment and interacts with it, onlookers are free to watch what happens to the user. A second video projector shows video segments, stored on a laser disk, that are triggered by the user's actions.

Each user's experience of the clinic is influenced by his or her responses to a series of questions posed by a nurse/receptionist in the waiting room. The questions range from the mundane ("Do you have health insurance?") to the personal ("Would you like to have a date in Cyberspace?").

"If you answered questions about wanting to determine the color of your baby's eyes, perhaps you would end up in the Ob/Gyn suite as an amniotic fluid sample," said Brown.

From the waiting room, the user moves through the clinic for a three- to five-minute virtual experience.

With the navigational device (in the form of a specially designed wheelchair), the user can move freely, looking left and right, up and down. Certain objects glow with intensity. By choosing these brighter images with the navigational device, the user triggers virtual events within the computer-generated space, and video events being displayed in the gallery space.

Though resembling a video game, the experience is meant to be thought provoking as well.

Kelly Coyne, a member of the art team, said, "We were really interested in the way technology is being used to image the body. We were attracted to these ideas and to exploring the questions, 'What is the infobahn? What constitutes the virtual body? What is cybersex?'

"So we decided to use the clinic as a way of saying that we --are examining virtual reality--rather than virtual reality examining the human body."

Aside from the virtual experience, the exhibit features some other related installations.

For example, an adjoining room will feature a grid of suspended wire cables and tiny video monitors illustrating the ancient Cartesian perspective system (invented by the 16th century mathematician and philosopher, Rene Descartes) on which the structure of computer designed visuals and virtual space is based.

A small alcove in the gallery will be wired with archival sounds taken from television, radio and film, to accompany a Super-8 film projection of ashes falling from the sky (a comment on what some call society's information overload).

In another corner of the gallery, a computer terminal will be set up where viewers can access a World Wide Web site that describes and documents the installation of "Apparitions," in addition to displaying images and sounds from the exhibit.

"It will be like a conversation," said Coyne. "And we hope it will generate discussions about the nature of virtual reality."

The "Apparitions" exhibit also has an electronic mail aspect that welcomes participants and community members to take part in an electronic conversation about the show by sending electronic mail queries or comments to vitalsigns@ucsd.edu.

Financial support for the exhibit, directed by University Art Gallery Director Gerry McAllister, was received from Silicon Graphics, Inc.; SONY Electronics; William Hawkins and Mary Berglund; UCSD's University Art Gallery Council; the Division of Arts And Humanities; the Academic Senate Committee on Research; Academic Computing Services, and the School of Medicine Learning Resources Center.

There is no charge for admission. A fee is charged for parking on campus; parking information pavilions are located at the Gilman Drive and Northview Drive entrances to the campus. For information call, 534-2864.

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