Technology Is Part of Life – *and Art*

Beall Center exhibit showcases the few constraints of ‘expanded media arts’ and how it intertwines with the human experience

By Shari Roan | Photos by Will Tee Yang / Beall Center for Art + Technology

“E.E.G. Kiss,” by Karen Lancel and Hermen Maat

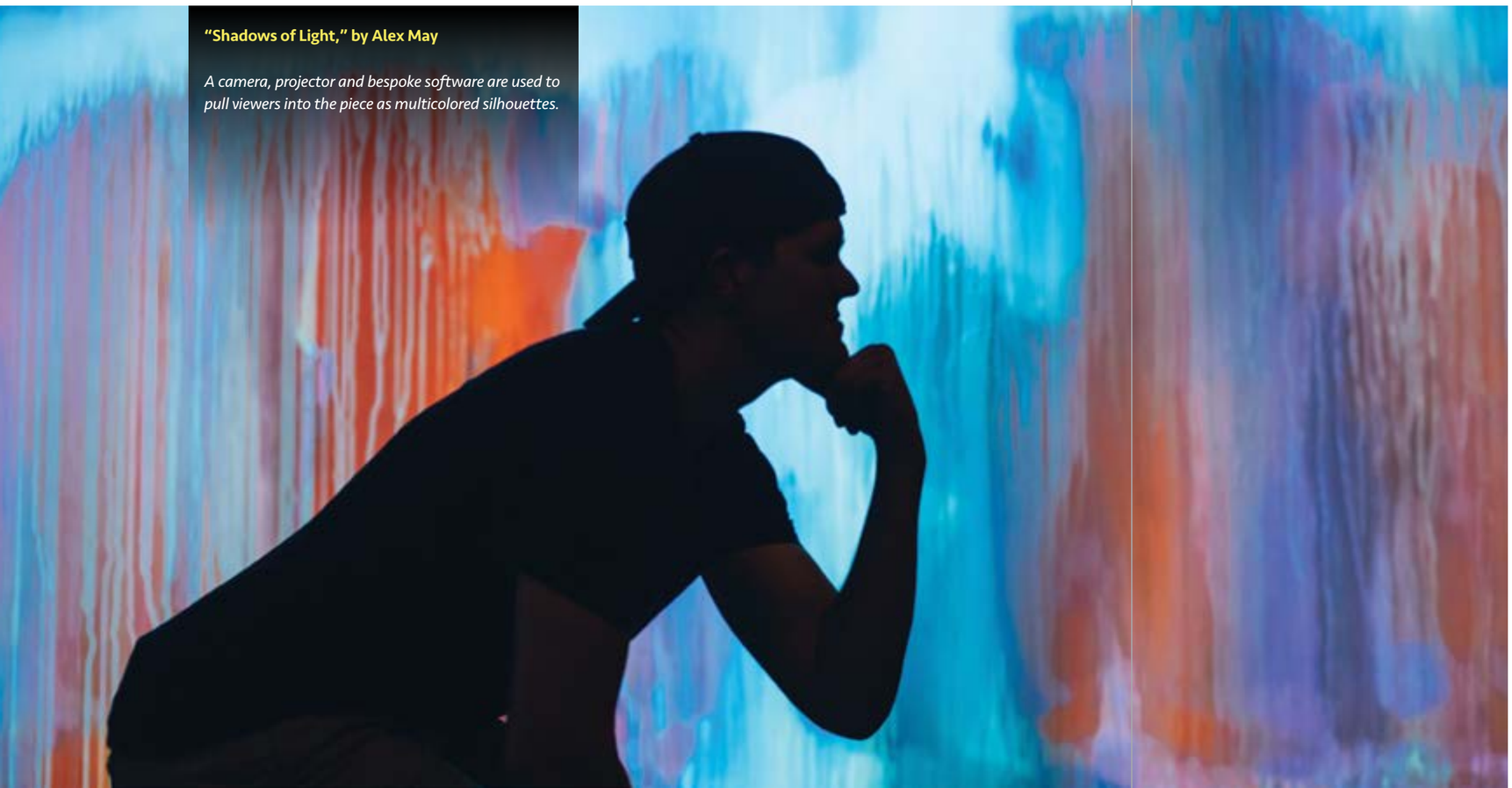
Viewers and participants wear devices to measure brainwaves during a kiss. The biofeedback data is projected in the space.

I'm standing before a wall-sized screen in a darkened corner of the Beall Center for Art + Technology. A blend of amorphous human figures in rainbow shades begins to take shape. Within minutes, I see my own silhouette emerging on the screen, first in ghostly white, then slowly changing color and blending into the forms of people who have come before me.

While the UCI venue's "Embodied Encounters" exhibition feels like a cross between a really cool science center show and an interactive art display, it's ultimately representative of a novel art movement that incorporates technology to express the 21st-century world. While the art-tech movement is not new, the growing presence of digital devices in everyday life has more artists pondering its power to elevate contemporary art and provide commentary on society and culture.

The piece that has me transfixed is entitled "Shadows of Light." Created by Alex May, it comes to life via a screen, Xbox camera, computer and projector. The camera captures the outline of each viewer. The longer a person remains still, the more pronounced the image is in color and depth. However, the "paint" will start to drip, spread and merge with the traces of prior viewers. I have difficulty extricating myself from the work, moving a few steps to the right and then to the left to see new images of myself appear on the screen. What is the piece saying? That I'm alone in the world? Indistinct from the masses? That we view each other in the broadest of terms, missing what individualizes us?

The docent accompanying me, a freshman drama student named Isaiah Tadros, smiles at my reaction. "It raises questions about everyday life, maybe suggesting that we should all slow down," he says, noting that it requires a minute or two to see one's silhouette appear on the screen and become vibrant with color. "All of these exhibits produce many different interpretations. Most of the people who come here say the show is really different than they thought it would be."



"Shadows of Light," by Alex May

A camera, projector and bespoke software are used to pull viewers into the piece as multicolored silhouettes.

Expanding the Possible

Part of the intrigue of blending art and technology is that it has few constraints. Even the name of the medium is open for discussion. Co-curator David Familian, artistic director of the Beall Center, calls it "expanded media arts."

"To me, it's not about what technology you're using, because what you're really doing is adding new possibilities to a medium," says Familian, who has been curating for almost nine years, with a focus on digital technology and art. "It expands on what's possible. But the work still has to be about something; the artist has to have an idea. If it's just a gadget, that isn't going deeper into what art needs to do."

"You can contemplate a painting, but our world is no longer static. This art form reflects the complexity of the world we live in."

Expanded media arts pieces can encompass three-dimensional printers, lasers, cameras or computers. The trend is here to stay, because technology is now inexorably linked to the human experience, says May, a London-based artist who created his own custom software for "Shadows of Light."

"Technology provides radical new tools for artists to explore and experiment with," he says. "Technology is a human creation; it's a mirror reflecting our creativity and inventiveness, and that brings all the trappings of the best and worst aspects of humanity. This is not a new trend, of course. Artists have always explored the rough edges of humanity's relationship to the universe we inhabit, as well as between ourselves."

Some viewers find expanded media arts more compelling than contemplating a 19th-century impressionist landscape, Familian notes.

"I'm interested in works that engage all our senses, not just our eyes," he says. "You can contemplate a painting, but our world is no longer static. This art form reflects the complexity of the world we live in."

Tapping STEM Fields

The "Embodied Encounters" exhibition, which closed last month, featured works by seven contemporary artists from across the globe. "Cardiomorphologies," a 2007 installation by Australian artist George Khut, creates geometric shapes through the viewer's real-time heart and breath rate data. It comprises a floor-to-ceiling screen with video images that are controlled by the heartbeat and respiration of the participant, seated a few feet away in a comfortable leather chair and wearing a pulse oximeter on a fingertip.

Another display, from the Amsterdam-based duo of Karen Lancel and Hermen Maat, invites visitors to wear electroencephalogram headsets that measure brainwave activity. They either kiss or watch another couple kiss, as the data – the participants' sensory perceptions – are displayed visually as EEG waves.

A previous exhibition at the Beall Center, in the spring of 2016, explored the interface between biotechnology and art and featured "necklaces" containing synthetic amino acids and bacteria that produced energy to run a musical synthesizer.

"Time Lenses," by Sha Xin Wei, Todd Ingalls and Julian Stein

The artists use live video to produce a rhythmic aspect to the activity of viewers in the space, projected on three screens.

Usually, the artists possess a certain amount of technological know-how, Familian says. "They're not saying, 'I'm going to call up a scientist and engage with him a little bit and make some art.' Most artists in this area have long-term relationships with researchers," he explains. "It's about knowing what your medium is. We expect painters and sculptors to know their medium as well."

May taught himself to code at age 8 and says he's equally attracted to art and technology. He recognizes, however, that not every artist has sufficient training in such fields as computer coding. Recently, he released an open-source digital art platform for anyone to use.

Artists are inspired by modern materials and feel free to tap into the expertise of people in other occupations to bring ideas to life, says Irish artist Rhona Byrne, who also exhibited in the "Embodied Encounters" show.

"In my work, I try to rethink the capacities of materials," she says. "Technology has always impacted how art is made, as it opens up new potential for stretching ideas. I like to collaborate with people from different disciplines to push the possibilities. Combining knowledge, technology and skills can have really exciting outcomes."

Younger artists and art students are not intimidated by technology and will have growing opportunities to blend art and technology. This is especially true for those in K-12 art-STEM classes , Familian says.

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"There are an increasing number of art programs around the country that teach computer programming and the creation of interactive artwork," he says.

The trend is more popular in Europe, but shows pop up occasionally in the United States, with the Beall Center positioned as an ideal venue in which to explore the emerging medium. The spring 2016 exhibition featuring biotechnology was a joint effort of the Beall Center, the UCI Center for Complex Biological Systems and the campus's Newkirk Center for Science & Society.

"We want to be the place people would come to see the way in which emerging arts are actually working," says Stephen Barker, dean of UCI's Claire Trevor School of Arts. "Our students are increasingly well-trained in their interfaces with technology. We have to make sure that, as a research arm of a research university, we stay one step ahead. We want to make the Beall Center not only a showcase but an academic program to create possibilities for the training of a new generation of artists working across metadisciplinary space."

He encourages faculty from other disciplines, such as the STEM fields, to collaborate with the arts programs. It's a myth, Barker says, that people can't be logical, critical thinkers and also creative, accessing both the left brain and the right brain to reach new levels of intellectual productivity.

"We're trying to be a catalyst for conversations between people who are not used to talking to each other but have common interests," he says. "Everybody has this creative disposition, but it's bred out of us. The School of the Arts is the place where you can rediscover it."

Taking Legal Power to the People

Alum's apps promote autonomy for clients with disabilities

By Cathy Lawhon

Michael Iseri, J.D. '15 calls himself hardheaded.

His life path backs up that assertion. In high school, he was shot in the skull while walking with his twin brother. He lost nearly 3 pints of blood and had surgery to remove the embedded pellet-gun shot. A 1-inch difference in the bullet's trajectory could have been lethal.

Born with oromotor dyspraxia, which made it difficult for him to form words, Iseri overcame a severe speech impediment to graduate *summa cum laude* from UC Berkeley.

He doggedly applied to more than 15 law schools a year for three-plus years before being accepted at the UCI School of Law. Administrators of the LSAT had maintained that Iseri's disabilities did not warrant any special testing accommodations – a ruling he labels "clear, outright discrimination" – so his scores were less than stellar. When UCI gave him a chance, he proved himself, graduating on time and passing the bar on his first try.

"All this has provided me a different perception of life than most people," Iseri, 30, says today. "I have a greater appreciation and understanding of people's stories, and I empathize with and relate to people who are struggling."

Combining this perception and his education with a natural affinity for technology, he recently launched an enterprise called LAWPP that markets two mobile programs to lawyers and public-interest corporations. The Esq. A.I. computer application offers simplified versions of legal documents so that clients with learning disabilities, autism or language barriers can complete them in a way that promotes self-determination and respects their autonomy, Iseri says.

Essentially, Esq. A.I. utilizes a simple interface and custom artificial intelligence to automate almost any legal need. It enables anyone – from a seasoned attorney to a first-time client – to fill out legal documents, forms and letters quickly and correctly. For cybersecurity reasons, no content is transmitted on the internet, ensuring that it remains under attorney/client control. The program can switch easily to many different languages, which is especially useful for pro bono and public-interest law clinics.

LAWPP also provides guides with streamlined legal information and maps of local legal resources in California. The two published so far explore small-claims procedures and services for the homeless. With additional support and funding, other guides are planned on elder abuse, identity theft, domestic violence, landlord/tenant and housing disputes, traffic citations, etc.

Iseri says his products will let attorneys set up mobile clinics focused on basic public-interest law out of an overnight bag – necessitating only a touch-screen tablet and a wireless printer.

"It's like the automobile in the age of the horseless carriage," he says. "More importantly, technology is an equalizer in terms of people with physical disabilities, ADHD or autism."