

# TIMES-CALL

## Artist Michael Theodore trains computers to assist in creative process

**Picasso computers**  
*Quentin Young and Laura Poole*



BOULDER -- Michael Theodore is killing art. Either that or he's a harbinger of undreamed of forms of art.

The work in his solo exhibition, called "Field Theory," at the CU Art Museum relies on computers to such a degree that they take some authorship away from the human who programs them. Theodore uses computers not just to process his work but to help invent it. He coaxes computers to create images on their own, then chooses the good parts to present to the viewer.

The show, therefore, raises several questions. Can computers be creative in a way that's anything like the way a human artist is creative? Will a day come when human-made art is quaint? Could computers write something like "King Lear" or paint something like the "Mona Lisa?" Will computers themselves someday have the capacity to appreciate art?

Humans who appreciate new ideas and methods in art will find much to contemplate in Theodore's show, which is on view through July 14.

The dominant piece in the show, both in scale and effect, is "Swarm Wall," a slightly slanted wall that is more than 12 feet high and 42 feet long. Covering the entire face of the wall are different shapes and sizes of cut-up PVC pipe that are "played" by swinging coils made from book binding plastic. The coils are interactive, and motion sensors at the bottom of the board alert them when to move. Sometimes they respond to viewer movement, other times they do their own thing according to algorithmic conditions unknown to anyone but the computer they spring from. The coils are driven by individual motors, and as they are dragged across the pieces of PVC pipe they make an expansive sound like rain on a roof or leaves in the wind. An inspiration for the piece was the little woodland creatures from the film "Princess Mononoke," Theodore said.

To complete the piece, Theodore collaborated with Nikolaus Correll, who designed the circuit boards, and Ken Sugawara, who wrote the software. As the viewer moves closer or farther from "Swarm Wall" or strolls from side to side, triggering various responses from piece, artificial intelligence governs the extemporaneous quality of the work.

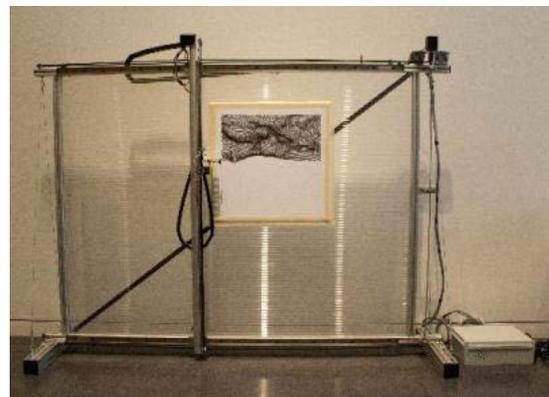
It's eerie.

A series of abstract drawings in the exhibition were created by a computer numerical control, or CNC, machine rigged with a drawing utensil. Theodore programs the machine's software, which "speaks" to the machine to make variations of an original drawing of his. Video pieces in the show create images based on a similar process, except they do it with pixels instead of ink.

Theodore sees computers as "creative assistants" and a "tool for expressing ideas," he said. A computer can't come up with art on its own, it still needs a human to put in software and give it a starting point, he said. He explores simple ideas, sets them in digital motion, and sees what emerges. It's a question of exploration for him.

A large, contemplative lights and sound piece in the back gallery is simple and elegant. Theodore projects light onto two sheets of tulle -- the material used for a bride's veil -- that hang from the ceiling while fans blow them around. Simple yet deceptive -- it isn't until viewers are up close that they know what they're looking at. The piece's music component consists of the notes C, A, G and E (chosen in honor of the composer John Cage) played perpetually in various combinations. Sometimes the piece's ever-changing colored lights speed up or slow down, and they brighten or dim. Who's to say what the computer controlling it is thinking? It has a mind of its own.

"Field Theory" is part one of a three-part series of exhibitions at CU Art Museum called "Art/Tekne," curated by the museum's director, Lisa Tamiris Becker. Boulder artist Jen Lewin will exhibit work in part two next summer and Aurora artist Todd Siler will exhibit work in part three in the summer of 2014. The series features solo exhibitions of internationally known Colorado new media artists whose works explore relationships between technology, aesthetics and society.



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