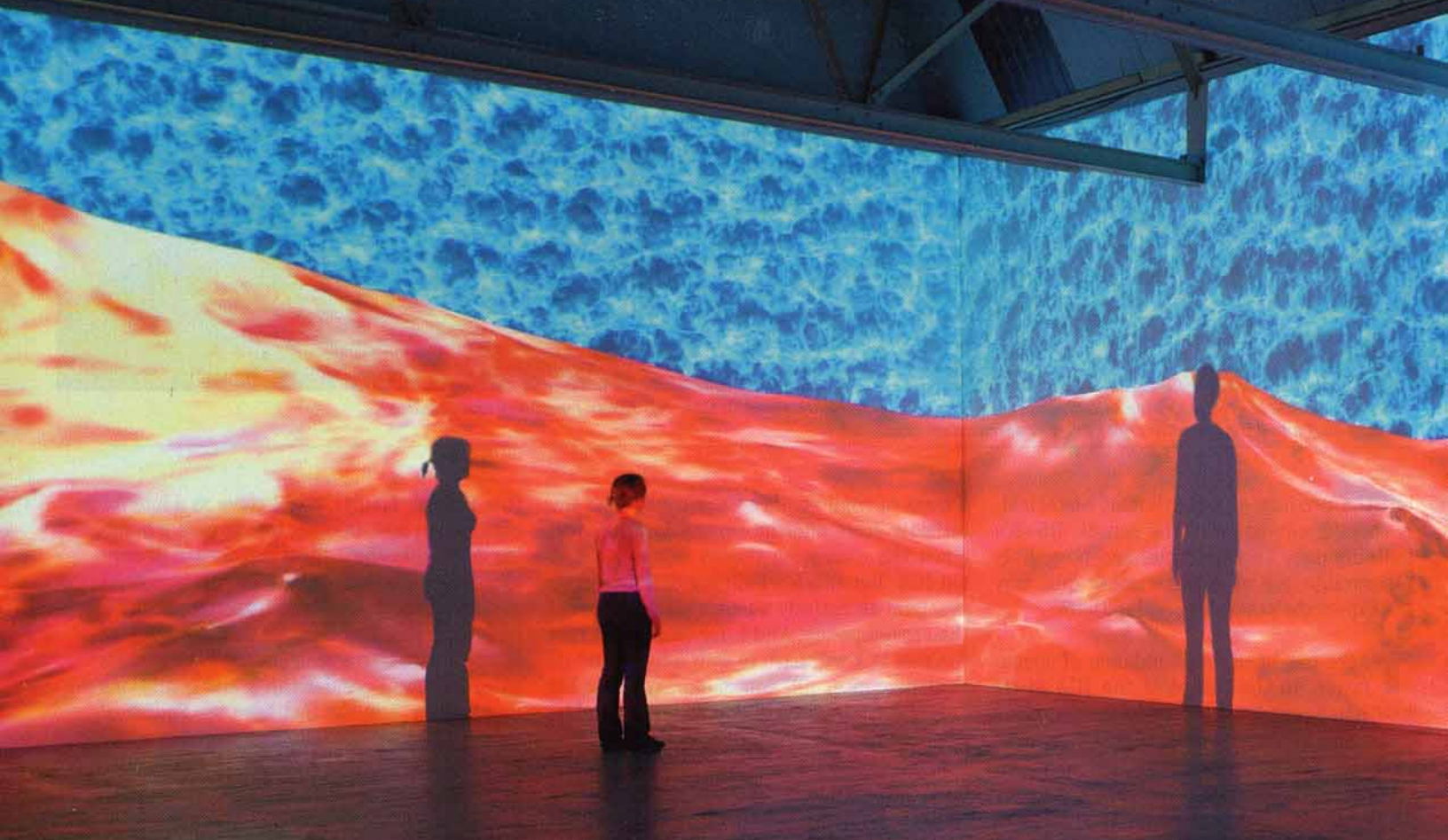


# Brightness Falls

BY CHRISTOPHER MILES

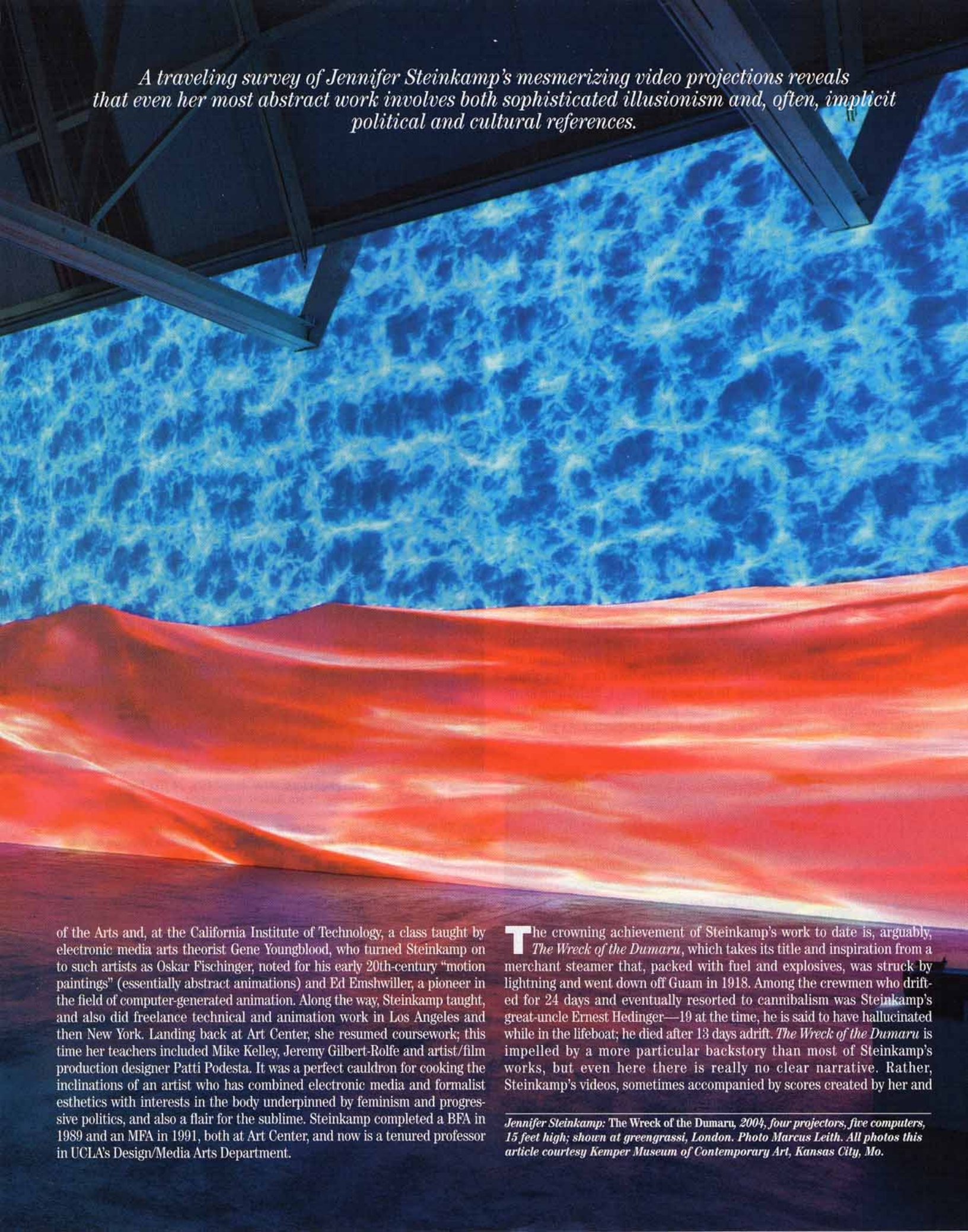


Imagine yourself adrift on the ocean after the god Poseidon has swirled its surface with red and other bold hues, like a craftsman preparing to marble paper. This sea rocks with swells that deny you a view of the horizon, but there is none anyway, for where there should be sky, it appears instead that the ocean's furthest reaches have risen up on edge and surrounded you—as if the sphere of the world had turned inside out. There is no beginning or end to this story, only this moment in these circumstances. Fraught with wonder, awe, calm and dread, this moment—a fusion of the hyperreal and the supernatural—repeats endlessly.

This vision is *The Wreck of the Dumarú* (2004), a digital animation/installation by Denver-born, Minneapolis-raised, Los Angeles-based artist Jennifer Steinkamp. The work, involving five computers controlling four digital projectors synced to create a seamless panorama across two

walls of a large room, debuted at greengrassi in London in 2004 and was exhibited simultaneously last fall at the Taipei Biennial and Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York. It is also the centerpiece of a traveling retrospective of Steinkamp's work, which ran last July through October at the San Jose Museum of Art, where it was organized by senior curator JoAnne Northrup. With a lineup of works that changes at each venue, the exhibition (along with its stylish catalogue, which has essays by Northrup, Dave Hickey and Dan Cameron) tracks the development of a body of ever more ambitious work that cements Steinkamp's status among artists using digital media.

Steinkamp's studio practice has been informed by, and intermingled with, her academic life. Between 1979, when she arrived in Los Angeles, and 1989, she studied off and on at Art Center College of Design, where she took a motion graphics course. She also took classes at the California Institute



*A traveling survey of Jennifer Steinkamp's mesmerizing video projections reveals that even her most abstract work involves both sophisticated illusionism and, often, implicit political and cultural references.*

of the Arts and, at the California Institute of Technology, a class taught by electronic media arts theorist Gene Youngblood, who turned Steinkamp on to such artists as Oskar Fischinger, noted for his early 20th-century "motion paintings" (essentially abstract animations) and Ed Emshwiller, a pioneer in the field of computer-generated animation. Along the way, Steinkamp taught, and also did freelance technical and animation work in Los Angeles and then New York. Landing back at Art Center, she resumed coursework; this time her teachers included Mike Kelley, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe and artist/film production designer Patti Podesta. It was a perfect cauldron for cooking the inclinations of an artist who has combined electronic media and formalist esthetics with interests in the body underpinned by feminism and progressive politics, and also a flair for the sublime. Steinkamp completed a BFA in 1989 and an MFA in 1991, both at Art Center, and now is a tenured professor in UCLA's Design/Media Arts Department.

**T**he crowning achievement of Steinkamp's work to date is, arguably, *The Wreck of the Dumarú*, which takes its title and inspiration from a merchant steamer that, packed with fuel and explosives, was struck by lightning and went down off Guam in 1918. Among the crewmen who drifted for 24 days and eventually resorted to cannibalism was Steinkamp's great-uncle Ernest Hedinger—19 at the time, he is said to have hallucinated while in the lifeboat; he died after 13 days adrift. *The Wreck of the Dumarú* is impelled by a more particular backstory than most of Steinkamp's works, but even here there is really no clear narrative. Rather, Steinkamp's videos, sometimes accompanied by scores created by her and

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*Jennifer Steinkamp: The Wreck of the Dumarú, 2004, four projectors, five computers, 15 feet high; shown at greengrassi, London. Photo Marcus Leith. All photos this article courtesy Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Mo.*

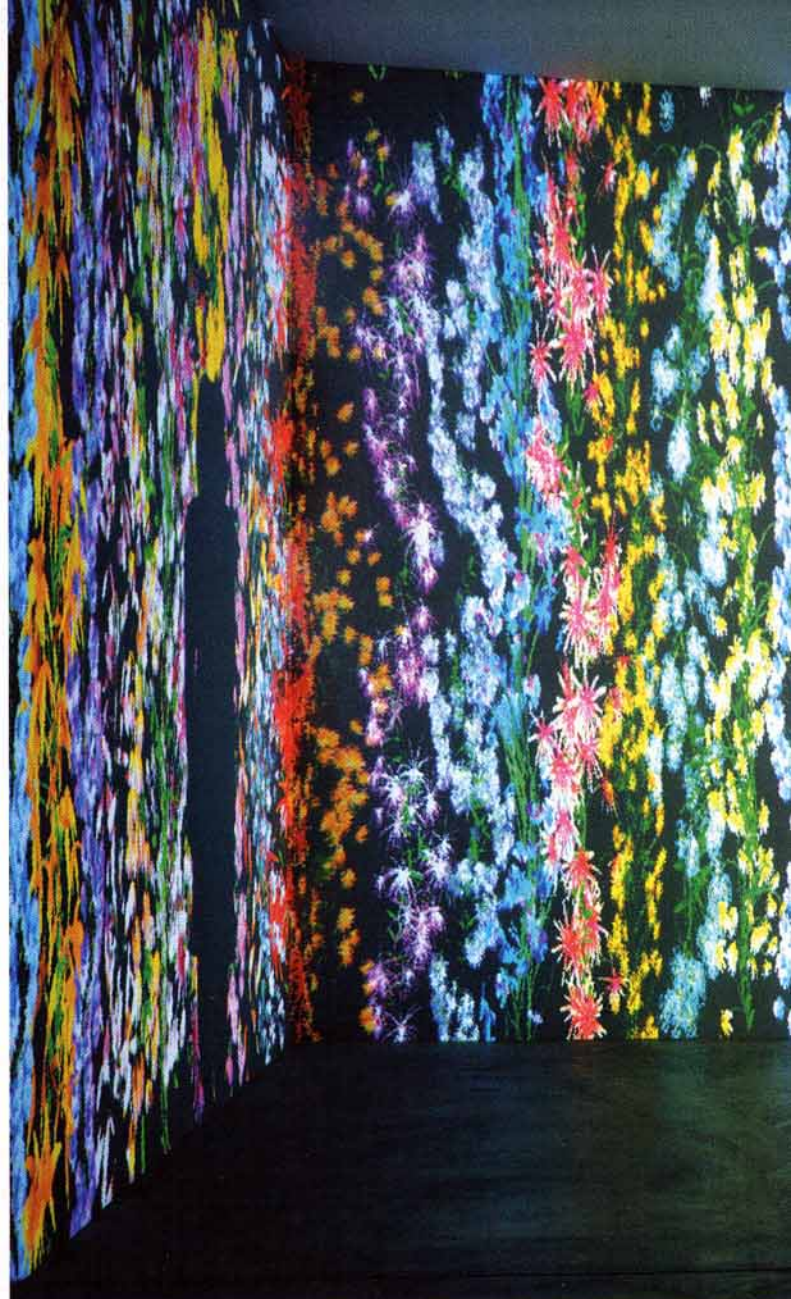
**Fading in and out, your shadow eclipses the image one moment and is erased by it the next, so you waver between active participant and passive viewer.**

musicians with whom she collaborates, focus on physical situations and optical points of view. *The Wreck of the Dumarú* is kin to a 1998 work, also included in the survey at San Jose, titled *A Sailor's Life Is a Life for Me*. Here, a rumbling sea of multicolored swells, rendered in a style suggestive of a Fauvist landscape or a child's depiction of rolling hills, shifts from horizontal to vertical, turns a corner from one wall to another, and in another version rotates, as if accelerating the world's daily rotation.

This kind of play on orientation is a hallmark of Steinkamp's work and reflects her innovative key practices: the use of multiple projections, careful cropping and masking, and specialized equipment and software to create works that defy expectations for projected media. She makes works that fit the architecture, but she also tailors the architecture to dovetail with her projections. The result is a sense of engagement. Viewers are made profoundly aware of their own presence and position vis-à-vis space and image, in a medium often associated with distance and detachment.

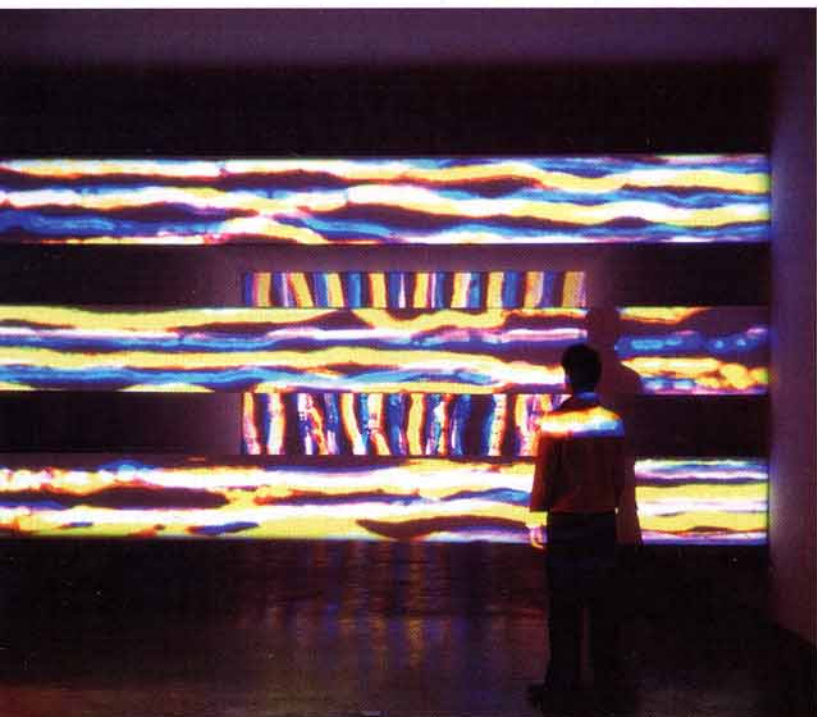
Often, the viewer's position becomes all the more complicated by shadow. Steinkamp frequently positions projectors close to the floor, one result of which is that viewers cast shadows that alter the work as they move, enhancing the spatiality of the experience. The interactivity is powerful enough that the shy set tends to seek the dead spots in the room, to the side of the projector, where one can (literally) hide from one's own shadow. When multiple projectors hit different walls, the more outgoing can double their shadow presence by finding a location that interrupts both streams of light.

In recent works involving synced projections, this relationship becomes more complex. Each projector receives data from its own partnered computer. An additional, executive computer essentially manages the others, keeping their playback in unison, and the projectors are delicately calibrated and carefully positioned so that their side-by-side projections fuse into a single, unified panoramic moving picture. To achieve this effect, Steinkamp found she had to slightly overlap the edges of the projections, which results in a curious side effect—a happy accident that she has exploited. As you move



Jimmy Carter, 2002, three projectors, three computers, 14 feet high; shown at ACME, Los Angeles. Photo Robert Wedemeyer.

Left, TV Room, 1995, two projectors, two computers, audio by Andrew Bucksbarg, 13 feet high; shown at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. Photo Alex Slade.



toward the union of overlapping projections, the shadow you make by blocking the light from one projector is filled in by the uninterrupted light of the next. Fading in and out, your shadow thus eclipses the image one moment and is erased by it the next, depending on where you stand. Such a scenario has obvious metaphysical implications and adds an interpretive layer to the imagery, while also affecting the relationship between viewer and work: you waver between active participant and passive observer.

**P**lays upon architecture date to Steinkamp's earliest works; a simple example is *Stripey* (1995). Here, two horizontal bands of color appear to snake across a wall, oscillating between crests and troughs, their sinuous movements sometimes harmonizing. Similar bands turn up in the more architecturally complex *TV Room* (1995). Here Steinkamp takes a cue from Dan Flavin, who often created grids by overlapping vertical and horizontal fluorescent light fixtures, and also used the tubes to form barriers that controlled one's visual and physical access to space. Steinkamp's



horizontal bars are constructed and plastered like the walls of their surroundings, and they block entrance to the room. They serve as narrow screens for bands of projected color that seem fluid, rippling from one side to the other; beyond them, between the bars, one sees similar bands rippling vertically down the inaccessible far wall of the room.

The colored waves of *Stripey* and *TV Room* are more akin to the kind you might see on an oscilloscope than on the ocean, and it comes as no surprise that certain kinds of fluid movement recur in Steinkamp's oeuvre, given her predilection for repetitive movement: other works feature cylinders that keep on turning, static that endlessly dances, flowers and drapery that sway back and forth, fluid that forever flows. Each wave or ripple is an event in itself, and each precedes yet another of its kind. Likewise, one finds oneself in Steinkamp's works in an experience that is both momentary and perpetual. Even when she is using imagery that suggests some finality—explosions and starbursts—Steinkamp repeats them so regularly as to undermine their climaxes, leaving what seems the final frame of a progression still etched in your retina as the progression starts again.

By the same token, what would seem the most abstract of elements—simple planar shapes, lines, grids—are made animate: the line wiggles, the grid breathes in and out, the plane flips and flops. Each of Steinkamp's projections is a fusion of the abstract, the literal and the symbolic, with

shifting emphases. Though critical attention has recently focused on the representational aspect of her practice, even the most "abstract" of her works also employ, in addition to movement, the kinds of illusionistic perspectival tricks found in Op art, whereby two- and three-dimensional space are confounded.

**G**ender Specific (1989), Steinkamp's first architecturally integrated projection piece, consisted of paired, rear-projected window installations, one set up in a storefront, the other in a suburban bungalow. Separated by a metal panel printed with a fleur-de-lis pattern were a pink-polka-dotted figure spinning into a watery vortex and a view of the earth, moon and stars as if seen by someone hurtling through space. As its title suggests, *Gender Specific* was a coded fusion of abstraction and symbolism, with manifold roots. They include the under-acknowledged critique of both representation and abstraction embedded within Op art, the assertion of artistic freedom as well as the phenomenological experimentation of Light and Space art, the democratizing esthetics of the Pattern and Decoration movement, and feminism's exploration of the gendering of images and space.

If you think the swaying flowers, seemingly illuminated by bright light against a dark ground, with which Steinkamp lines the walls of *Jimmy*



*Eye Catching, 2003, 3 projectors, 3 computers, each tree 14 feet high; at the Yerebatan Cistern in the 8th Istanbul Biennial. Photo Muammer Yanmaz.*



*Carter* (2002) are just wallflowers, think again. Steinkamp's titling of *Jimmy Carter* was a last-minute tribute to the peacemaker when he received the Nobel Prize just days before she first exhibited the work at ACME gallery in Los Angeles. But, recalling photos of protestors stuffing flowers in rifle barrels at a 1967 march on the Pentagon, the work also pointedly envisioned a world of illuminated flowers just as the U.S. was gearing up for war in Iraq.

*Jimmy Carter* was a kind of floral rendition of another Steinkamp work, *Loop* (2000). In an echo of painter Gene Davis's 1975 conversion of the Corcoran Gallery of Art's rotunda into a kind of rainbow room by lining it with vertical columns of color for the museum's 24th biennial, Steinkamp, invited to participate in its 46th biennial in 2000, covered the walls of the stark white room with her own rainbow of colored lines. The coffered dome of the Corcoran, which is just blocks from the White House, was festooned with playful and lovely projected loops, dangling like strings.

The title *Einstein's Dilemma* (2003) refers to the scientist's difficulty in reconciling his pacifist beliefs with the military applications of his theories. Motion sensors in the installation allowed visitors to Caltech's Athenaeum faculty club, many of them scientists, to trigger a continuously reconfigured bouquet of pastel-colored explosions, projected on the semi-circular walls at either end of the lobby's barrel-vaulted ceiling. As with *The Wreck of the Dumaru*, the work's fiery iridescence is inflected by its political background.

This is not to say that Steinkamp's works need always be interpreted politically, but that her process is highly sensitive to context, as exemplified in the case of *Eye Catching* (2003). Created for the 2003 Istanbul Biennial and installed originally in the Yerebatan Cistern, home to two giant carved stone Medusa heads, Steinkamp's work comprises three 14-foot-high projected trees animated to sway as if with the wind. On closer inspection, one finds that the smaller branches move in a faster, more serpentine manner, suggestive of Medusa's coil of snakes and implying a realignment of the fearsome mythical woman with natural beauty. As is often the case with Steinkamp's works, *Eye Catching* has implications that are deeper and more serious than one might initially suspect.

**A**t their core, all of Steinkamp's works, even those that are specifically referential, are calls for self-awareness—provocations to probe what we can't know or see. The recent works *Formation* (2006), exhibited at Lehmann Maupin last fall and just added to the Kemper Museum leg of the survey exhibition, and *Rock Formation* (2006), installed permanently on a sloping wall of the Denver Art Museum's new Daniel Libeskind-designed building, address precisely this concern with the unseen. In both works, luminescent sheets of fabric appear to drift in endless succession from the top to the bottom of the wall upon which they are projected. Initially, the rippling of the fabric seems merely the result of falling through the air in the darkness, but one begins to sense that the fabric is catching and rubbing on something as it falls.

Steinkamp here borrows an old trick used in film to represent the presence of the invisible. As with the Invisible Man's bandages, the unseen takes shape by way of that which drapes over it. In this case, the falling sheets reveal a rocky terrain we glimpse only as they pass over it—another potently open metaphor—encouraging viewers to learn a new way of looking. Steinkamp's works afford us the opportunity to engage a moment, to consider carefully what is in view and what is behind the scene, and to figure out where we stand in relation to it. □

*Jennifer Steinkamp's work was included in "Visual Music" at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art [Feb. 13-May 22, 2005] and the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C. [June 23-Sept. 11, 2005]. A solo exhibition opened at the San Jose Museum of Art [July 1-Oct. 1, 2006] and is currently on view at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Mo. [Feb. 23-May 13]; it travels to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y. [Nov. 16, 2007-Feb. 24, 2008]. It is accompanied by a catalogue with essays by JoAnne Northrup, Dave Hickey and Dan Cameron. Steinkamp's work could also be seen in New York City at Lehmann Maupin Gallery [Oct. 21-Nov. 25, 2006].*

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