

# With the tech-y Blink!, curator Jill Desmond makes sense of the nonsensical

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For most of the history of settled humanity, there have been two forms of visual art: painting and sculpture. But in the twentieth century, new art genres were born involving mechanical features that spun or lit up. The first of these were created by the Italian Futurists right before WWI and the Russian Constructivists right after.

It took until the 1960s or '70s, though, for work of this sort to be widely embraced by artists. And with this critical mass of interest, new forms were developed: fine-art films and videos, light sculptures, installations, projections, audio works, kinetic pieces and digital creations, among others. Some were direct outgrowths of the modern movement, while others crossed a stylistic divide and embraced postmodern sensibilities.

Jill Desmond, a young curatorial assistant in the Denver Art Museum's Modern and Contemporary department, has wandered into this tangled ideological wood with ***Blink! Light, Sound and the Moving Image***. A large and rambling exhibit, *Blink!* highlights art that employs technology, and Desmond has done an undeniably good job of making sense of the sometimes nonsensical, especially considering the issues that exhibiting this kind of work presents. She made it look easy.

Desmond, who was born and raised in Ireland, joined the DAM five years ago after earning a graduate degree at the University of Denver. When she was first hired, the idea of doing a show like *Blink!* had already been discussed by former curator Dianne Vanderlip and collectors and donors Mark and Polly Addison, who have a special interest in technology-based art. With the opening of the new building and the departure of Vanderlip, the idea was dropped. But a year or so ago, Desmond picked it up again, poring through the archives of the department's holdings to establish which pieces were relevant to her theme. The object lists didn't specifically bracket pieces with technological features, however — most were categorized simply as sculptures — so she had to do some extra sleuthing. To complete the roster for *Blink!*, Desmond supplemented the pieces from the permanent collection with loans from artists and from the Addisons.

*Blink!* begins in the glassed-in former gift shop at the base of the atrium that's become an ad hoc exhibition space. Here, Desmond has created what she calls the "Blink! Animation Studio," which includes sectional sofas on one side arrayed around monitors that can display seven animated videos. (These comfy-looking sofas are seen throughout the show: Desmond realized that if visitors were going to experience art that takes time to unfold, some might want to sit down during the process.) On the other side of the room are tables and chairs where visitors can create their own animations. Also in this space are a set of meticulous representational drawings by Stacy Steers, who uses them to create her digital animation; additionally, there is an abstract painting on unstretched canvas by Michael Burton that he used to create his.

Across the lobby is a signature Jenny Holzer, "Selection of Truisms," in the form of a moving, lighted sign that spells out palliatives. Opposite that is "Feng Shui Brain," a site-specific installation by Donald Fodness made of archaic speakers and TV sets.

The show continues on the second level. In the atrium is "Mice," by Stephan Reusse, which is projected onto the main wall. This moving-image work, Reusse has done laser-green outlines that describe the shape of a mouse. The outlines move naturalistically, seeming to scurry across the wall either alone or in groups. Also in the atrium — as another appetizer to the showstopper — is "Light/Albers," by Heather Carson. Made of fluorescent tubes, it instantly recalls the work of Dan Flavin and, on reflection, the squares of Josef Albers.

These initial works hardly prepare us for the shocking impact of walking into the Martin and McCormick Gallery, which is akin to entering a funhouse at an amusement park or maybe standing in Times Square at night. The viewer is immediately confronted by an assortment of images and sounds that overlap one another in the eye and the ear. It's truly a cacophonous experience that will leave you a bit jangled. The way these kinds of works tend to intrude on one another is a real problem. But to her credit, Desmond has done a good job mitigating the downsides of competing soundtracks and reflected light.

Dominating the opening stanzas of the show is "Three Love Songs From the Bottom of the Ocean," by Matthew Weinstein, an enormous animation projection on a curved wall depicting a cartoon fish singing torch songs. It is absolutely impossible to miss, and it's unquestionably engaging. More subtle are the two works by Nam Jun Paik, a pioneer in exploring television in mixed media. Back on the right is a more contemplative passage of videos; some, like Gary Emrich's "Gray Zone," are on smallish monitors. Another, Lorna Simpson's remarkable "Easy to Remember," is multi-channel, with a ceiling-mounted baffle meant to direct the soundtrack down to the viewer.

Up next is a soaring space where the spectacular "Of the North," by Steina, covers the walls with moving projections of natural materials in spherical shapes. And it is here where we begin to see that the large-

scale pieces that fill their own, individual galleries are hard to beat, working not just on the level of monitor-bound videos, but also as overwhelming installations.

Though not entirely in its own space, Flavin's "Untitled (for A.C.)" has plenty of room to strut its stuff. The piece is a window of sorts made from fluorescent tubes that has been installed so that it diagonally cuts a corner in the room. With so many other artists in the show being at least partly inspired by the late Flavin's oeuvre, the presence of this piece would seem essential, though I was surprised that the museum's well-known James Turrell and its Robert Irwin weren't part of the mix.

In its own discrete and almost completely enclosed space is "Still Men Out There," an installation by Bjørn Melhus that uses old-style monitors placed on the floor and facing the ceiling. They pulse monochrome screens in sequences determined by a soundtrack comprising lush Hollywood movie scores, snippets of dialogue and the sound of gunfire. It's pretty cool, in a nightclub sort of way. So is the digitally based projection with soundtrack "Codework," a series of changing abstract fields with the silhouette of a man in a hat by Mark Amerika, who is a pioneer in computer-based art. The piece is installed in its own black-painted theater.

Through a warren of spaces, several of which feature art made of neon, visitors finally arrive at what could be called the show's finale: "Chamber," by Charles Sandison, which debuted in *Embrace* a couple of years ago. In the insanely complex spaces at the end of the gallery, where triangular fragments of walls and ceiling seem to collide at will, computer-generated words and shapes on a ten-channel projection zip along the surfaces. The words are in constant flux and change periodically. The experience of being in "Chamber" is literally dizzying, and if you're one of those prone to vertigo set off by the building's interior, skip this part of the show altogether.

Though many of the inclusions in *Blink!* are quiet and subtle — like Lars Kremer's "Anatomy Lesson," in which old-master drawings of figures are outlined on the screen while Kremer contorts himself into the same pose — the overall experience of the show is almost like going to a carnival, with flashing lights and discordant sounds all around.

One of the problems with art of this type is that it's not very viewer-friendly, but Desmond solves that problem by turning the exhibit into a spectacle, giving us more than we can possibly absorb and making it impossible for boredom to set in. And that's why it works. By assembling a whole bunch of related pieces, Desmond was able to come up with a whole as great, or even greater, than the sum of its parts.

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