Order Is in the Eye of the Beholder

Ben Laposky's photographs—described in a 1997 book on computer art as the "first graphic images generated by an electronic machine"—are both beautiful and fascinating for their mix of human and mechanical input. A draughtsman for a sign-painting business in Cherokee, Iowa, Laposky began experimenting in 1950 with an oscilloscope, a device that records the activity of electrical circuits in wave-like patterns on the screen of a cathode-ray tube. By adding circuits he produced a variety of patterns, which he then photographed. Fifty black-and-white images were exhibited in 1953 at the Sanford Museum in Cherokee (later his work was shown throughout the United States and in Europe and Israel). All but one of those 50 are part of the show at the Illinois Institute of Technology, which also includes 52 of the color images he began making in the mid-60s, using filters to color the patterns, which he apparently later superimposed on one another. For two decades he mounted exhibits and wrote essays on what he called his "oscillons" or "electronic abstractions." But while the advent of computer graphics in the 60s, Laposky appears to have stopped photographing and exhibiting. He died in 2006, and his work faded from view until the present show.

With the current plethora of precise-to-the-pixel art, Laposky's photographs can be seen for the unique, inventive works they are. They show much less evidence of the artist's choices than meticulously controlled digital artwork; in fact Laposky stressed in his statements that after setting up the electrical circuits he wanted, he altered nothing. Instead his curved shapes reflect the mathematical relationships that describe current and voltage. At the same time, his photographs are decidedly fuzzier than most digital prints. Perhaps because the oscilloscope patterns were generally moving, or perhaps because of the limitations of his photographic technology, or of the oscilloscope's screen, Laposky's lines are soft-edged—incomplete records of fleeting instants.

The designs themselves are wonderfully complex, with sinuous curves looping through space to create floating shapes in delicate harmony, set dramatically against a black background. The lines in three images out of a kind of double crown from a bright center, while 79 shows rows of lines with bulbous ends, looking like hanging tasseled cords. 43 seems to record a twirly's spiraling path through space. One of the color images, 2226, suggests superimposed blue, red, yellow, and white flowers. The rhythm and balance in each piece reflect not only the artist's vision but the ordered principles underlying the physical world.

An installation by Evanstonian Vera Scevick in the Cook County Administration Building's rear lobby, an outpost of the Hyde Park Art Center, offers a cheerfully disruptive contrast to one of Chicago's dreariest interiors. Bilateral Symmetry consists of two huge paintings on facing walls, each filled with a grid of 13 by 15 circles in almost carminish colors—a sharp contrast to a place otherwise oppressed by various shades of brown. The circles are out of pools of poured paint; they're often thick, and none is perfectly round—all have bumps and indentations and little cusps, which enhance their visual interest. Her "symmetric grids are trying to impose order," she writes, "while the gravity-molded circles push back against this Cartesian space." The lobby is also a giant collection of grids—in the floor, the ceiling, the nearby elevator bank, and in the panes of glass above and alongside the paintings. By providing another, highly imperfect grid, Scevick both echoes and defies the surrounding space, letting in a whiff of the organic. —Fred Camper
Shining light on work of electronics pioneer

Space-age modernism seen in Ben F. Laposky's images

By Alan G. Artner
Tribune art critic

Few exhibitions are as rewarding as those that rediscovers the work of forgotten pioneers, and the Kemper Room Art Gallery has organized one of them on behalf of Ben F. Laposky, a pathbreaking figure in the area of art and technology.

Beginning in 1950, this lensman and painter created the first major body of art made with an electronic machine. Others experimented with a few graphic images, but in almost 30 years, Laposky produced up to 10,000 examples of a kind of "painting in light" that was the epitome of space-age modernism.

He called the initial black-and-white images "electronic abstractions," as they were non-representational waves photographed from the screen of a cathode-ray oscilloscope, an instrument used by radio and TV technicians during the 1940s to depict changes in electric quantity, such as voltage and current.

Oscilloscopes produced limited waveforms, so Laposky created circuits to achieve greater variety of design and composition. At first, he directly recorded the patterns with fast camera lenses. But within a few years, he viewed the traces through color filters before shooting them, and he called these prints "cosmiclines," writing that "they represent in a unique way that photography can be a fine art."

In 1963, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art organized an exhibition of 30 of his prints, which during the next decade traveled to more than 30 cities in the United States. The present show restages that one — all but a single print from it are on view again — adding a complete laser exhibition of 53 color pictures plus much documentary material (including the artist's oscilloscope) to form the largest survey of the work in 30 years.

Laposky wrote that he created the pieces "primarily for their value and appeal as abstract art, not objective fine art, apart from their possible technological or scientific interest." But he also acknowledged their possible application in the graphic arts, and it was in advertising of the 1950s and 1960s that they reached a wide audience as signs of a lyrical, optimistic future.


Their origins are clearly in geometry and mathematics, and some on view are clearly distortions of the pattern in physics known as the Lissajous figure. Even so, many of them are breathtaking in their elegance, simply fulfilling Laposky's goal to use electrical vibrations in light to please the eye, as sound vibrations in music are used to delight the ear.

Several of the forms also show correspondences with open-wood sculptures of the period, particularly those constructed of such materials as stained glass, wire, and aluminum. But our particularly remarkable piece additionally evokes the recollection of the kind of geometric abstraction painting influenced by Piet Mondrian, an indicator of Laposky's high level of seriousness.

The artist died in his mid-60s in 2000. His building spirit lives on here.

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