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Review/Art; The Case for Holograms: The Defense Resumes

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Whatever happened to holograms? Twenty years ago these strange pictures, which usually take the form of glass plates on which murky photographic images marked by an intense illusion of three-dimensional space can be seen, enjoyed a flurry of attention as a medium for making art. A number of major artists -- Bruce Nauman, Yaacov Agam, even Salvador Dali -- tried their hands at making holograms, and a variety of institutions presented exhibitions of the new pictures. But then a pioneering survey of work in the new medium, held at the International Center of Photography in Manhattan in 1975, met with a considerably less than enthusiastic response, and the art world's infatuation with holography soon faded.

Not that it disappeared. The process continues to have important technical and commercial applications, notably the identifying holograms that appear on many credit cards. But although it has resurfaced occasionally as an art medium, most artists and critics have long since ceased to take holography seriously.

Now a new exhibition of recent art holograms at the Whitney Museum of American Art, called "New Directions in Holography," attempts once again to make a case for considering holograms as art. The show was assembled by the guest curator Rene Paul Barilleaux, former curator of the Museum of Holography on Mercer Street in SoHo and now director of exhibitions at the Madison Art Center in Madison, Wis.

Rather than undertake a survey of current efforts in the medium, Mr. Barilleaux has chosen to present what he terms a "more focused" view of the field, including six works by Rudie Berkhout, a Dutch-born artist who now lives in New York, and one by the team of Martin Wenyon and Susan Gamble, who now live in Japan. For this show, the first exhibition in many years of work from a little-known corner of the art world, limiting the work presented in this manner may have been a serious mistake. Viewers are given only a small range of images by which to judge the current state, and artistic potential, of an entire medium. Moreover, both Mr. Berkhout and the team of Mr. Wenyon and Ms. Gamble make essentially abstract images, further narrowing the sense of the field provided by the show.

Mr. Wenyon and Ms. Gamble are represented by "Stella Maris" (1989-91), a five-panel hologram mounted low on a wall that protrudes into the gallery space. The hologram records the optical phenomenon known as caustics, the weblike patterns of light and shadows produced when light shines through liquid, as in an illuminated swimming pool at night. The remarkable sense of depth in the images gives the pictures the feeling of windows in an aquarium, and one half expects exotically colored fish or playful seals to zoom toward the glass. But they don't. Even though the illusionistic space of the picture shifts as a viewer walks in front of it, these are essentially static images, more like stereographs than 3-D movies. Some forms of holograms can suggest a limited sense of action as one walks past, and scientists have developed prototypes for holographic movies. But so far no systems have become generally available that allow more than a few seconds of action to be recorded.

Mr. Berkhout's pictures make better use of the medium's chief strength -- its striking sense of depth -- while avoiding some of its weaknesses. Now in his mid-40's, he is represented here by a decade's worth of work. In his

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most effective piece, a bright red plank thrusts forth from the depths of the picture space, appearing almost to break the surface of the image; above it, a yellow calligraphic squiggle is tangled around a red moonlike shape. In other pieces, he records traces of light shining off piles of sand in his studio, producing semi-abstract images with a flowing, gestural quality. These never achieve any real complexity or sense of coherence, though, and in any other medium they probably wouldn't be looked at twice.

The problem with holograms isn't simply that they're technically demanding and expensive to produce. At least in their current state of development, they are both too real and not real enough. The intense illusion of depth they offer is so startling that it's easy to get caught up in it, at the expense of the picture itself. At the same time, holograms lack the formal richness of more conventional media. The colors are always the same sort of intense, spectral hues, and forms seem to be cloaked in smudgy gloom. Moreover, holograms are so unusual that they require a suspension of customary habits of viewing behavior. For example, in one type of hologram the image can be viewed only by light transmitted through it from behind, and as a result viewers must move back, rather than closer, in order to see the picture more clearly.

The Whitney deserves credit for taking the risk of presenting work that has long remained on the fringes of the art world. But, at least judging by this show, holograms remain fabulous freaks, tantalizing for the possibilities they seem to offer, but deeply frustrating for their very real limitations as expressive objects.

"New Directions in Holography" remains at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, through Dec. 29.