

ESSENTIALLY PITTSBURGH

Art for the asking

EXHIBITING ON CYBERSPACE CUTS THROUGH CONVENTIONAL RED TAPE

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For a growing number of computer savvy artists, the days of validation by third parties ended the night their online accounts were activated.

Artists, photographers, poets, even fiction writers have abandoned the humiliating drama of negotiating with galleries, museums and publishing houses for the do-it-yourself frontier ethic of Internet web pages.

But even as the winds of revolution sweep through the art world one byte at a time, it's too early to tell whether exhibitions in cyberspace are harbingers of a general movement to circumvent galleries or a new way of soliciting exhibition space from them.

For the first time since the gallery system became dominant in the 19th century, art connoisseurs can access representations of vast amounts of art that hasn't received an official stamp of approval by the establishment.

Some fans of digital exhibitions insist that art and photography downloaded onto the World Wide Web may be the most democratic forum for images since television entered the home in the 1940s.

Western Pennsylvania artists have joined the cyberspace migration, but an exact count of local websites is impossible to determine because of the sprawling nature of the Net, now pushing 22 million browsers.

Take a look-see

"For the 500 people who wouldn't have seen my work otherwise, it's a kick for me," said Richard McWherter. The 38-year-old photographer from Derry titled his website "Eager Eye," an allusion to a Lewis Carroll poem about perception.

"I like publishing, but I've never been able to talk a publisher into doing any of my work," he said.

McWherter's website contains a collection of colorful rural scenes called "Carriage Leaf" and a black-and-white study of rituals called "Sheltered Passions."

"With my own website, I can publish without paper in a cost-effective way and probably reach as many people as I would've through a more traditional route."

Though he has won numerous awards for his work, McWherter has yet to break into the national spotlight. Electronic publishing may be the best way for him to circumvent the de facto embargo on his work in print.

"I've gotten responses to my work on the Net from as far away as Australia and Japan," McWherter said.

"Even a few Pittsburghers have looked at the art and sent me messages since the web page went up in the middle of December. But more people look at the work than send me messages."

Artist Dennis Childers exhibits his work on his own homepage in cyberspace for equally pragmatic reasons:

"The gallery scene is kinda going away," Childers said.

"Because of lack of funding, things are dying out. There's still galleries out there, but they're not doing as much. And it's kind of hard to get a show with stuff you've been working on (recently)," he said.

"Even artists who are very established are having problems. People don't buy as much as they used to. I never sold a lot anyway, and that has something to do with (the chances of) getting a show."

But economics haven't informed Childers' decision to take his art to the Net as much as a desire to test the potential of the medium as an honest broker of talent.

"I don't think this is going to replace the feeling of viewing art in galleries and museums," Childers said, pooh-poohing any expectation that cyberspace could evolve into a substitute for public exhibition.

Childers, a full-time teacher at Pittsburgh's High School for Creative and Performing Arts, also believes art is heading in a more interactive direction in terms of educational value anyway.

"It's more for people getting things out to other people," Childers said.

"Suppose you have some work you want a gallery in Italy to see. It's no longer a matter of making expensive slides of your work. Now you can put it on the Net, give them your address and they can call it up immediately. It's a virtual portfolio."

Asked how many artists he thinks are using the Net now, Childers laughed.

"If there are 20 million people on the Web, then there's 20 million artists."

Technology as the handmaiden of art

Louis Daguerre, the French landscape painter who invented photography, probably wouldn't have been able to get his head around the concept of Internet web pages.

More than a century-and-a-half after daguerreotype — the metal and glass forerunner to photography — separated images from objects in the real world, many of the Frenchman's spiritual descendants have squeezed thousands of photographic images and paintings into the conceptual wonderland called cyberspace.

"There's usually a duality between hardcore traditionalists who use silver-based images vs. contemporary digital artists," McWherter said.

"I think of technology as a tool. If something is traditional and it (still) works, go with it. If it can be updated with technology, feel free to do it. But it shouldn't be gee-whiz technology for its own sake."

McWherter cites his use of traditional enlargers as an example of adapting old ways to new approaches.

"Debates about which is better and which is pure don't make sense to me," he said.

"Art is art and these are just tools. The Web is just a tool. As a matter of fact, I think of myself as a painter working with photography. This is an extension of that."

Childers agrees.

"It's a new medium," he said. "It's a new way of using computers in general and creating things. With my art, it's a matter of images going straight from computer to computer, so you're getting the original with no degradation."

"But you have to realize that when you do the printout, there are some changes. It's not going to glow like it did on the monitor. There are subtle changes," he said.

Like McWherter, Childers emphasizes that browsing the Net for art is no substitute for the experience of connecting with art in the real world.

"(Internet art) gives people an opportunity to see something they like. If they like it, they can go to a gallery if it's on display and see that work. In the end, it'll promote and make people more interested in art."

But what about the primordial fear many artists have of seeing their work appropriated without just compensation? After expressing mild flattery at the prospect of being stolen from, Childers and McWherter agreed the risk is worth it.

"I'm not concerned with that myself," Childers said. "I'm not into this for the commercial side of it anyway. If people want to use it, fine. I know I'm not going to make a million dollars. I'm not in it for that."

"I'm a trusting individual," McWherter said, adding that at 30,000 bits per image, his work isn't likely to be stolen too easily anyway.

"People are more likely to get bored and move to something else during the transfer time it takes to get something with a good resolution," he said.

Both McWherter and Childers have exhibits up on their home pages. To access McWherter's home page on the World Wide Web, type:

[WWW:http://ourworld.compuserve.com/hompages/cager/eye/](http://ourworld.compuserve.com/hompages/cager/eye/)

Childers' three-part exhibit "Church," "Trees" and "Toys," an investigation of found images manipulated by computers, can be accessed on the World Wide Web at: [WWW:http://oberon.pps.pgh.pa.us/~childers/more.html](http://oberon.pps.pgh.pa.us/~childers/more.html)

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