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Restless Pictures
By David Pagel

"Stiffs," the new light-and-sound installation Jennifer Steinkamp made in collaboration with sound engineer Jimmy Johnson, parts company with her earlier works because it doesn't use architectural space to build bodily impact. Rather than creating the mind-bending sensation that the walls, floor and ceiling are dissolving into a liquid stew with a pulse of its own, this extraordinary installation at Art Center College of Design's Williamson Gallery works directly on a viewer's body (not to mention one's mind).

To step into the darkened gallery is to feel as if you've entered a movie theater through a service door facing the side of the screen. To get a better view, you head to the left, where you see that Steinkamp has constructed a compressed multiplex of her own: six separate screens, each about as wide as an ordinary doorway and as deep as a suitcase, which extend from the floor to the 20-foot ceiling.

Projected onto each plinth-like screen is a computer-generated array of lines, shapes and colors, whose compositions continually shift as their elements accelerate, slow down, stop and start up again. Like abstract paintings that are too restless to settle into static formats, Steinkamp's skinny images resemble contour maps of lava flows on fast-forward, superimposed over abstract views of water lapping on a harbor's shore. As if hyperactive offspring of Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey," they also appear to record an earthworm's EKG, its 12 hearts pumping as if each had a mind of its own.

Slicing the spectrum into six segments, Steinkamp's high-tech "stripe paintings" simultaneously filter traditional tints through the techno-glow of electronically transmitted energy. Magenta replaces violet; pink usurps red; blue is softened by aquamarine; green has a lime tone; yellow gets a hint of gold; and orange a lemony lilt.

So mesmerizing are the overlapping patterns set up by Steinkamp's projections that you nearly forget to walk to the other end of the large gallery--where everything appears in reverse, as if you've stepped through a mirror. But don't stop there. The best place to experience "Stiffs" is from up close, wandering among its double-sided screens, which do double-duty as speakers for Johnson's weirdly hypnotic soundtrack.

Transforming the agitated buzz of static into a hum at once soothing and stimulating, his deceptively simple music complements Steinkamp's throbbing abstractions. Paired, the artists' works dovetail in an installation that invites viewers both to get lost in moments of peculiar intensity and to stand back and take in an overall view of the whole. Either way, "Stiffs" leaves you with more energy (and thoughts) than you came in with, suggesting that the only stiffs are those who don't stay long enough to be moved by its trippy rhythms.