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March 28, 2013

Cave art

Lisa Frank's 3D paintings surround the viewer in SMU's data cave creating an immersive—and trippy—experience.

By Jaime Forsythe



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Immerse yourself in the art of Lisa Frank.

Stepping into one of Lisa Frank's lush nature scenes is a mix between tumbling down the rabbit hole and becoming the hero in a video game. Her vibrantly coloured, three-dimensional digital "paintings" require a special environment, though—the kind we just happen to have in Halifax, tucked in the McNally Building at Saint Mary's University. SMU's data cave is a diorama-shaped room designed for rendering images in 3D and allowing the viewer to be physically immersed in an environment. Normally used for research purposes—to simulate constellations, for example, or explore the inside of a molecule—the cave is being opened to the public for a limited time to exhibit Frank's work.

Bob Deupree, director of the Institute for Computational Astrophysics at SMU, says the illusion is all about the brain being tricked. Deupree and Frank, who is currently a senior research fellow at the Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology at the University of Illinois, have been working together over the past couple of months to coordinate the technology necessary to send viewers on a trip both realistic and fantastical.

Frank's process begins with taking photos on her walks and hikes. "I've created a pretty expansive library of seasons to draw on," she says. Living in Wisconsin, one of her favourite places to walk is the forest along the Ice Age Trail, a 1,000-mile path that traces the debris left by glaciers from the last Ice Age. She goes on

to digitally alter the photographs using techniques she developed while working with a computer science graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "With something like Photoshop, there are a gazillion books you can read and videos you can watch, so it's easier to self-educate," Frank says. "But with a cave, there's virtually nothing available—it's never been used much as an artistic medium. So we really just had to make it up by trial and error." The two mentored each other to find the place where the languages of science, technology and fine art meet: "I would talk about form, and he would talk about geometry," Frank says.

Frank, who once worked as a wallpaper designer, draws from the logic of patterns and how they order nature. She is influenced by the designs of William Morris, a 19th century arts and crafts designer who used nature imagery in setting up patterning for rugs and wall coverings. The scenes she creates are incredibly detailed, down to every twig, blossom and leaf. Wearing stereoscopic LCD glasses, which fuse the images being sent to each eye from two projectors, viewers are able to move around in a forest, garden and castle. It's hard not to duck when a large branch comes swooping by, or reach out to touch the speckled eggs sitting in a birds' nest.

However, the virtual reality experience wasn't something Frank was able to imagine from the beginning. "I was more involved with the technical process of trying to do something, anything," she says. "To my utter amazement, it turned out to be something people responded to in a way I didn't expect. I'm used to hanging work on the wall in a gallery and having people come and look at it, which is kind of a sombre experience. This took my artwork and made it animated and approachable. People were more uninhibited...it opened up something unexpected for me that was kind of about wonderment."

Because SMU's Data Cave can only accommodate four people at a time, aspiring avatars (who must be 16 or older) are asked to reserve a spot by contacting Florence Woolaver at 420-5105.

From Illusion to Immersion

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Saint Mary's University data cave

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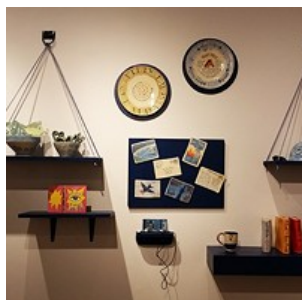
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