

ENTERTAINMENT BLOGS

Lisa Frank's wide open art cave

By Karin Wolf, Art City contributor

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(See updated scheduling information at bottom).

If you have lived even a few decades, you know the excitement that comes with technological advances that change your assumptions about reality. Photographer Lisa

Frank's master's thesis exhibition "<1>: "der" //Pattern for a Virtual Environment" takes viewers right through such a gateway to the future.

To experience Frank's wonder cave one must pass through three security clearance checkpoints and descend deep into the underbelly of the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery (WID). After passing glass enclosed research labs and sci-fi like computer equipment, one eventually arrives on site, ready to contemplate perception, reality, illusion.

There are fewer than 10 CAVES© in the country that allow for a fully immersive 3D virtual environment. CAVES© are typically used to prototype new devices, in this case, an unprecedented collaboration made possible by researcher Patricia Brennan and her Living Environments Laboratory who opened Madison's CAVE© up to an experimental art

The docent explains that if you feel nauseous inside of the 10x10 foot cube in which 3D images are rear screen projected on three sides, the ceiling, and the floor, you need only close your eyes to regain composure. Guides issue special stereoscopic LCD shutter glasses (think View-Masters on steroids) needed to produce the illusion of depth in Frank's environments (now think Star Trek Holodeck).



The technology is fresh and kinky. Every day new things go wrong. Fifteen minutes before opening night it did not look like the environments were going to load. But these small dramas just add to the heady feeling of pushing the limits of innovation.

Frank's latest work would be best experienced solo, but due to the expense of running the exhibition, tours accommodate seven people in the cube at once. The problem is that only one person has control and the power to choose which virtual environment to experience. That individual decides if viewers go under the earth to examine roots, fly into the sky, or move through walls. Things can get pretty cozy as visitors, in order to experience a greater visual impact, huddle closely to the controller.



Once Frank had access to this unique tool for her MFA exhibition, she began collaborating with Nathan Mitchell, a computer science graduate student with expertise in virtual realities. Together, they converted Frank's digitally manipulated nature photographs

into six virtual environments, which viewers experience as though they

In the nest, the viewer can peek inside of an egg shell or fly above the nest and into the hazy tree canopy. In another environment, the viewer can slip through a narrow passageway from one room to another. In the bleeding heart room, bright pink blossoms appear as if they are going to hit the participant in the head. In the mushroom diorama, viewers can explore the underside of a mushroom and or encounter a pulsating mycelia. Even sober, sophisticated, academic types duck for objects that do not really exist and make Dead Head-like comments such as, “Wow, I’m inside a flower.” One participant asks, “Is this the future of TV?” Another replies, “It already is.”

As intended, the wonder CAVE© blurs lines between art and technology. Frank’s photography is kaleidoscopic and beautiful, even in its traditional 2D format. In the CAVE©, however, the onlooker’s worldview has to recalibrate with their cognition in order to extract a satisfying analysis of the art. The experience is far too paradigm shifting for anyone to care.

"<1>: "der" //Pattern for a Virtual Environment" is only going to be open from December 9 –16, with very limited hours. Reservations are required. Here is a video of the work.

Updated Note: Due to the extraordinary response, the CAVE exhibition has been extended. Extra hours next week include: Monday from 5 to 7 p.m., Tuesday from 5 to 7 p.m. and Wednesday from 5 to 7 p.m.