Outta site

Web-based art is finally breaking into serious museums and drawing big prize money. It hasn't yet reached critical mass, but observers are predicting a fabulous future.

BLAKE GOPNIK
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In about 1425, legend tells us, the Fleming Jan van Eyck first championed oil paints. He started a long-lived trend.

Some 300 years later, the French amateur Etienne de Silhouette explored the art of the cut-out portrait. His name lives on, but not his favourite art form.

In the 1840s, William Fox Talbot made the first photographs on paper. Still a big success. A decade later, Frederick Scott Archer used glass plates coated in incendiary gun cotton, then dipped in deadly potassium cyanide. Not so popular today.

And then, in 1989, scientist Tim Berners-Lee dreamed up the World Wide Web, and artists all over jumped on it as the next big thing. Which leads to this pressing question: Will the Web be the new oil paint, sparking centuries of great creation, or will it flash in the pan, then disappear for good?

For now at least, the art world is betting on a rich future for on-line art.

On Thursday, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art announced the winners of the gallery's first-ever Webby Prize in visual arts (http://www.webbyawards.com/sfmoma), a massive $50,000 award for the best in Internet art.

And across the continent at New York's prestigious Whitney (http://www.whitney.org/), this year's Biennial Exhibition includes a slew of Web sites, while the museum trumpets the Internet as the first new medium to hit the Biennial since video in 1975.

But for all this bullish faith in the future of the medium, the belief in its present greatness is less certain. Hours of interviews with people in the thick of Internet art, from curators to artists to eager surfers, didn't turn up many willing to go to bat for works that are out there now.

"I've never felt that same kind of buzz you get in front of a great painting -- the feeling the top of your head is coming off -- in front of a piece of Web work," said Luke Murphy (home.att.net/~luke.murphy), a Nova Scotia-bred painter and conceptual artist who trained and then taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. "Though I think it may happen, someday." His ambivalence has survived a life in the thick of New York's wired community, as art director of Sony's ultra-successful Internet gaming site.

Murphy explained that both the technology and the protocols that determine how you can use it produce a ferocious sameness that makes it very hard for a single image to stand out. It's as though all the world's painters were given the same size canvas, the same set of brushes and a tiny set of toy paints, then told to go wild.

In 1995, when prescient curators at the Dia Centre (http://www.diacenter.org/) in New York started to commission Web sites, they smartly decided to invite established artists to have a go. Mistake. All a traditional visual artist can really do with the Web as canvas is take the same few elements available to everybody else -- low-resolution scans of images, plus the text, design elements and modest animation mandated by the programming languages -- and then collage them into somewhat new configurations. They can't even be sure of outdoing what top graphic designers produce for the commercial Web. A visually stunning site like Ben Benjamin's ever-changing Superbad (http://www.superbad.com/), usually bookmarked as fine art -- it's another chart-topper that made it to the Whitney list -- is actually the spare-time project of a leading Web designer. Which is what it feels like.

But the problem may be more profound than the fact that the Web's a poor tool for making important pictures. The Web's click-and-go mentality simply doesn't favour the contemplative mindset needed for traditional fine art. The Web, said Murphy, is about "perpetual motion -- which is anathema to people who make single images."

Visual art probably piggybacks on an innate human drive to explore our environment. So it's not far-fetched to imagine that, if you make the simple act of exploration too easy -- a click of the finger, instead of a slow walk to the water hole or through an art gallery -- it may distract from the things explored. On the Web, our instincts as explorers kick into overdrive, and never let us settle down with what we've found. Which means that artists keen to work on-line can't aim for old-fashioned visual profundity.

Though Murphy is usually a painter -- a show of his computer-inflected, sensual landscapes just closed at the Wynick-Tuck Gallery in Toronto -- his art for the Web (where he's known as the Reverend Luke A. Murphy), is rigorously conceptual.

His Mile Long Page, for instance, consists of a mile-long black line, and a mile-a-side black square, that visitors are invited to explore via their scroll bars. And if you get tired of scrolling, there are shortcut buttons that let you go straight to the middle, or right to an endpoint a full mile away in cyberspace. What would once have been a wry idea jotted in a notebook can now take some kind of tangible form. (Though when Murphy tried to make his line stretch for a light-year's full six trillion miles, it kept crashing his Web browser. "It's a shame. It would have let you jump from one end to the other faster than the speed of light.")

Like many similar Web-works, Murphy's is an elegant mind game, elegantly realized. Even he admits, however, that there's not "a whole lot of soul" in the one-liners that the Web tends to force on its artists.

Many art sites end up so thoroughly unvisual that their creativity seems more literary than anything else. The ultra-hypertexted site called Grammatron, touted as visual art through its inclusion at the Whitney, consists of an infinitely variable narrative that dances its way through cyberspace. The story has illustrations, but it feels as though it could live just as easily without them, like almost any other work of on-line fiction.

Other arty sites, though realized in visuals, sit on the theatrical edge of things. A middle-aged artist in Amsterdam -- she tries to remain anonymous -- has set up a clever Web site where she inhabits an alter-ego called Mouchette, portrayed as a 12-year-old girl who produces gorey bits of Web art with a pranksterish twist. This is high art that gets its punch by playing with the low -- a predictable option in a medium that doesn't let you go high end in the first place.

And then there are a pile of lively, even dangerous, Web sites -- caveat surfer -- where activists and anarchists and other creative troublemakers hack their way through capitalist cyberspace, often to powerful effect. One of the best, called ®tmark (pronounced "artmark"), takes the corporate language of the dot-coms, and rejigs it to undermine the system it was built to promote. A typical ®tmark Web page might seem at first to offer a straight-ahead investment opportunity, but punters soon realize that there's no money to be made here. (When ®tmark was chosen for the Whitney Biennial, it escaped the smothering hug of the establishment by throwing open its "real estate" on the Whitney Web site to other like-minded cyber citizens. Every time you now surf to the site, you're likely to come up against a different dose of Web rebellion.)

Pop collage. Conceptual art. Radical poetics. Role-playing. Political art. In case you haven't noticed, much Web art simply translates an extant artistic genre into its cybernetic equivalent, with more or less success. The most interesting artists, however, actually work with just the qualities specific to a worldwide network of computers.

Michelle Teran, a 33-year-old Alberta-bred Web artist who trained as a painter at Toronto's Ontario College of Art in the 1980s, is most interested in the social dynamics of life on-line.

"On the Internet, everyone's trying to be cutting-edge. The focus is on the technology, rather than on what's being said," she explained. "You don't want to be making art that is the technology." She prefers to make art that talks about the technology, and maybe even uses the technology to build artistic metaphors that range beyond it.

In Teran's latest piece, a public performance called Ménage à Trois presented a few weeks ago in the lobby of a Toronto college, she used the Web to bring audience and art-makers closer together. Sort of.

Costumed as a kind of futuristic waitress -- straight out of The Jetsons or Woody Allen's Sleeper -- Teran invited passersby to enjoy a moment's cyberchat with artistic collaborators scattered across the globe. You could see your distant interlocutor on a little LCD screen, but otherwise conversation was strictly routed through Teran, who typed the Toronto end onto her laptop, and then read out the written replies that came back to her.

It didn't take long before paranoia started to set in. Could you trust Teran to be an accurate and honest mediator? Was your Web-pal really in far-off Norway or just next door? For that matter, could you be sure that the antic figure on the screen had anything to do with the strange

answers being read out? They sometimes felt like they might even come from a computer programmed to make small talk, but not much good at understanding your end of it.

By inserting herself into the communications loop, Teran becomes a kind of biological node on the World Wide Web, though a somewhat doubtful one. The Internet, famed facilitator of global communication, suddenly starts to seem

suspect. And if Teran has her way, that suspicion may spread beyond the Web, to the very idea of straightforward understanding between two human speakers.

Of course, anyone who surfs the Web has occasions when communication of any kind seems a faint hope, as waylaid data crawl through at a fraction of the speed some optimistic artist had in mind. (At the Whitney Biennial opening in March, technicians wailed as Web site after Web site refused to talk to us.) Long-time collaborators Willy Le Maitre and Eric Rosensveig, Montrealers working out of both New York and Toronto, let the current limitations of the Internet power their art making, instead of trying to herald some resplendent techno future.

In a recent installation called The Appearance Machine, Le Maitre and Rosenzveig used the Internet to stream live video footage from their "perpetual animation machine" in New York -- a self-replenishing turntable full of garbage, with an elaborate system of fans and pneumatics, lights, cameras and computers animating it -- onto a projection screen at Interaccess gallery in Toronto. As it competed with other Web traffic, the image would break up into fractured pixillation. The stuttering data stream gave an almost painterly richness to their scenes of animated rubbish, but also did double duty as a metaphor for our culture's larger technopathologies. (The combination was so successful that the piece won the Telefilm Canada grand prize at Toronto's Images Festival of Independent Film and Video, the first installation to do so.)

"Art has to be a physical experience, not just an intellectual one," Rosenzveig insisted, speaking with Le Maitre and me by speakerphone from New York. (We were supposed to get together via live Webcast video conferencing, but the technology wouldn't co-operate -- a convenient illustration of some of the issues that their art addresses.) Like many artists, Rosenzveig and Le Maitre are eager to use the Internet, but only as one element in an art work. They remain suspicious of the idea that a little computer screen, sitting on a desk and competing for a viewer's attention with spreadsheets and e-mail, has much of a future as a vehicle for powerful art experiences. "The instinct to click onwards may not be an instinct only to look for something different, but to look for something better," said Le Maitre.

But the shortcomings of the medium may be more than simply sensual.

For all the talk of integrating art and life, modern society has almost always established special structures that set art experiences aside from other kinds. Put a hat stand, a found photograph or a steel cube -- even a hallowed, postcard-worthy masterpiece -- in an art gallery, or on a collector's wall, and they invite prolonged contemplation; leave them in the street where they were found, and the attention level goes way down. The Web is the busy street of cyberspace, so full of passing traffic and tempting short cuts that it's hard to imagine a driver pausing for an art break.

As a cultural phenomenon, the Web is clearly of huge interest. And as with every human creation, there will be more or less artful ways of making use of its resources; there will be, already is, an art of Web building. The World Wide Web may even end up having huge art-world

impact as a kind of cyber-salon, providing an invigorating social framework for the making of fine art. But the possibility of a Web site providing the charged visual experiences you can get from a good oil painting or video projection? Its chances of stealing the affections of visually-minded people away from Rembrandt or Stan Douglas? Until the technology improves, and we figure out just how to shape it into art, I'd put my money on old Silhouette.