

ARTS & ESCAPES

ART

By Dan Bischoff

Circuitous link between man and machine

From a distance, Pat Lay's paintings and prints look like Tibetan *thangkas*—densely patterned rugs whose intricacies are meant to stimulate contemplation.

But up close, you realize they're circuit boards, sometimes featuring a photo of a stylized human head peeking through the maze of silicon connections.

She also makes the heads as life-size plaster casts, and punctures them with fiber optic cables and ocular projections that recall the cybernetic prostheses of the Borg.

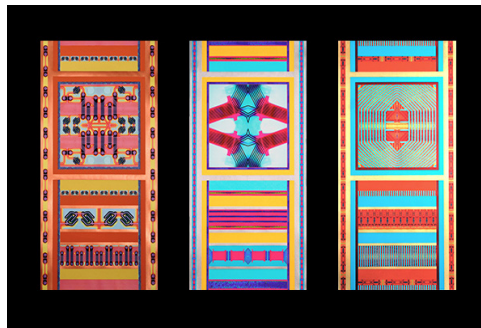
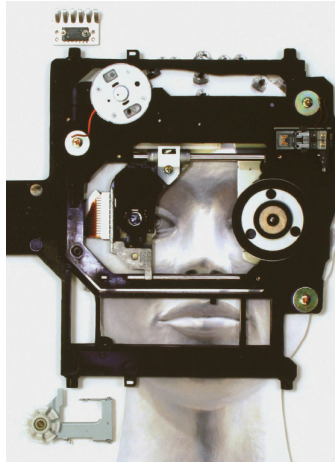
Through March, Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art is showing "Pat Lay: Myth, Memory and Android Dreams," a retrospective of the longtime Montclair State University professor and sculptor, as part of the alternative gallery's "Bending the Grid" series devoted to established artists.

The show begins with one of the earliest works by Lay to win national attention, a floor-piece of gridded tiles, glazed pyramids and fired clay sheets that was included in the 1975 Whitney Biennial. Along with the desktop-size tile-and-sand sculptures that look like miniature Japanese gardens, these untitled works hint that Lay has always been interested in the interplay of architectural formality and organic unpredictability.

'A family of artists'

You don't have to be Philip K. Dick to see cyborgs in her future.

"I come from a family of artists," says Lay, whose father David Lay, met her mother, Elizabeth Brown



Top left: A human face peers out from behind electronics components. Top right: Some of Lay's works resemble colorful Tibetan thangka rugs. Bottom left: Electronics cables are the crowning glory of one of the artist's plaster heads. COURTESY ALJIRA

Lay, when they were both studying painting at Yale. Her grandfather Charles Downing Lay was a successful landscape architect and town planner in New York, and her great grandfather, Oliver Ingraham Lay, was a distinguished portrait painter in New York City

When Lay was young, her mother painted portraits for a living, too, but during World War II she became first a draftsman for, and then a designer of, solid state circuitry.

Lay met her husband, Kaare Rafoss, Norwegian-born painter, at the

Pratt Institute when they were both students. In 1980 Lay and Rafoss pioneered two 1840 town houses in Jersey City, restoring them as home and studio space. They live there to this day.

"Making the decision to be an artist actually came very easily," Lay says.

In the 1980s and '90s, Lay made ceramic figures impaled on steel rods that recall Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti and Constantin Brancusi, like her "Mythoi" and "Spirit Poles." The shish-kebabbed ceramics can range in appearance from sticks to

Cycladic figurines, most painted black with white slashes. But the suggestion of totemic form, or at least fetishistic practice is persistent.

Lay had long wanted to use welded steel in her work, but when she was studying art in the 1960s at Pratt “they didn’t let girls weld.” Inspired by David Smith, after teaching for a while and then striking out on her own as an artist, she started combining steel and ceramics in a way that sometimes suggested steel limbs and abstracted heads or torsos. Those works are in permanent museum collections in New Jersey and New York. But around the turn of the 21st century, after participating in several Montclair State-sponsored exchanges with Chinese art institutions, Lay started to think about the Buddha as a metaphor for contemporary meditation.

At the time, East Coast sculpture was still very much tied to found-object collage. But with her mother’s work in solid state circuitry hovering somewhere in her memory, Lay started to pick apart contemporary technology for her art.

“Myth, Memory and Android Dreams,” which was curated by Lilly Wei, opens in Aljira’s storefront window with one of Lay’s plaster heads so porcupined with cables that they look like dreadlocks.

Hanging on the wall behind is one of her brilliantly colored prints that look like a circuit-board thangka, or some intricate tribal carpet.

The wall hangings are made of collaged papers, inkjet printed circuits, paint and photo-shopped imagery. Some are printed straight from the computer. All of the more recent ones are manipulated on the computer for color before they’re produced.

The link between meditation and digital paraphernalia mimes the interface everybody has with their tiny screens, and turns Lay’s iconography into metaphor. It isn’t merely the similarity between thinking and swiping right that Lay is measuring, nor is she layering her comment with irony. The connection to Brancusi is deeper than a fetish—in Lay’s work, digital memory is never-ending, like Brancusi’s “Endless Column.”

And that is rather like infinity—a fit subject for Daoist meditation.

IF YOU GO

Pat Lay: Myth, Memory, and Android Dreams

Where: Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, 591 Broad St., Newark

When: Through March 19.
Open 12–6 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays and 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays

How much: Free. For more information call 973-622-1600 or see info@aljira.org

www.aljira.org