

SHOWCASE

REVIEWS

'Liquid Meditation' at UIC

Artist meets state-of-the-art technology in "Liquid Meditation," Margaret H. Watson's interactive virtual-reality environment where viewers climb stairs in an imaginary museum.

Here the art touches you—quicksilver worms resembling the liquid metal-morphing "Terminator" zoom out from a canvas. Visitors can step through Watson's picture frames and swim into artificial worlds of pulsing watery patterns.

Watson, a master of fine arts student, designed this tour into alluring abstraction. It was on display over the weekend at the Electronic Visualization Laboratory of the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her medium is CAVE (Cave Automated Virtual Environment), a three-walled room where video projectors envelop 3-D glasses-equipped viewers in imagery. CAVES were invented at the UIC lab.

To visit Watson's virtual art last weekend, visitors had to stray from the usual art-world circuit. The route to "Liquid Meditation," located deep inside the lab, was

nearly as labyrinthine as Watson's alluring museum. Lab corridors sported signs reading "danger: laser" and "flame" wastebaskets: cues for a sci-fi blockbuster, not a transcendental tour of ponds, ripples and bubbles.

"Liquid Meditation" is an upgrade from Watson's earlier "Artica Intergalaxia," which featured red-carpeted walkways linking Greek temples suspended in outer space. Inside each of these mini-museums, she placed a painting that was a portal to a miasma of shimmering hues.

Watson's virtual architecture in "Liquid Meditation" evokes M.C. Escher's paradoxical staircases, as well as the faux futuristic design of UIC's concrete campus. An electronic music score by Eric Butkus tracks the itinerary with sinuous accompaniment, even though the sound effects of crashing concrete couldn't be heard as visitors joy-sticked their way through one of Watson's electronic walls.

Her work goes beyond a gimmick in a video arcade. High technology and low culture typically team up to manufacture theme-park thrills, but "Liquid Meditations" suggests a new venue for art experiences.

Bill Stamets