ABOUT THE COVER

But Is It Art?

Art done on a computer has been used for business graphics, for TV station logos, sports show introductions, and commercials. It has also been used in feature films and in documentaries. But is it Art? Would a museum, for instance, hang it?

Barbara Nessim, the creator of this month’s cover, not only has the answer; she is the answer. She has had her work exhibited in nine museums in the last two years, and two of the shows will be traveling around the country for a period of two years each. “Women and Computers” was first seen in the Olin Hall Gallery at Roanoke College in Virginia and is now on tour, and the Concordia Gallery in Lincoln, Nebraska, is also taking to the road with a show that includes Nessim’s work. Her computer graphic art has also been in galleries in New York City, Denver, Cologne, Germany, and New Orleans.

Many artists who find themselves involved in computer graphics get very involved in the machines they work with. They tend to become programmers. Not Nessim. She uses the computer strictly as a medium.

Nessim got her degree at Pratt Institute, but she has never stopped studying since, having done more work on a number of scholarships. She lectures often on the computer as a medium for the artist, and she teaches classes at two schools: the School of Visual Arts, and the Fashion Institute of Technology. She earlier taught at Pratt Institute for eight years.

Use it like a pencil

With so many artists who are using computers today becoming programmers, why has Nessim not done so? She views the computer as just another medium. If it has limitations, so much the better. She’ll use them as part of her bag of creative tools, just as she would use the softness of pastels or the shine of oils. She has remarked that she would use a pencil to create images that capitalized on what properties that pencil would bring to her work. She uses the computer the same way. Nessim’s work alludes to the Art Deco and Art Nouveau styles as you can see. She has used the simplest of computer tools to enhance that style.

She has worked on an IPS II for years. She says the resolution, available forms, and colors are very limited. But she uses these limitations to her own advantage. They are, if you will, part of her creation, as on the cover and in the rest of the series from which the cover was taken, shown in Figures 1-4.
Recently Nessim has added a Macintosh to her tools. "You can see the quality of the lines," she says. "You get a nice feeling from the computer." The images in Figure 5 are sketches she has done with the Mac.

Her latest tool is an IBM PC, with which she started using the Time Arts Easel program, producing the images you see in Figures 7 and 8. And now she is delving into the Time Arts Lumen program, which gives her 256 colors on the screen at one time, as opposed to the 16 available with the Easel. Nessim is using the Lumen program in her teaching.

The computer medium

Nessim herself best answers how she feels about using the computer as one of her mediums. "There is something fascinating about using a paint medium that moves as you’re working with it," she reports. "You can use a finished image, take it into many different directions, finish it again, and still keep the original finished image intact. This is one of the many positive aspects the computer embraces. This aspect, among others, can broaden the artist’s capacity to be more flexible than ever, therefore moving the work quickly into other directions. The luminosity of color, the easily mixed palette to develop the choice of colors, and the variety of tools, all in one place, is very attractive. Different from any past medium or tool, this artistic com-

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

Figure 5. Nessim rendered these two sketches on the Apple Macintosh and then added the color with pastels.

Figure 6. Nessim paints, with or without a computer, about relationships between people. This image tells her story, or your story, or the story of a friend. She has portrayed it in picture. Someone else will have to portray it in words.

Figure 7. This statement about the individual woman's relationship to the world of men is framed on a favorite medium of Nessim's. She likes to work on deckle-edged paper. Here she has created an image on the computer version of deckle-edged paper.

Figure 8. In this statement about relationships the man holds a large communication disk. The woman is exercised, and...

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munication device, using the pictorial medium, can send immediate visual messages through wire or air. The computer, still in its formative stage, has many uses still to be discovered and invented by the artist. The computer is now used in a variety of ways; as a tool for planning and development as well as an end product.

"Working as a professional artist for more than 20 years, I've used, and continue to use, many mediums extensively. I enjoy the variety and the distinct differences between using oil, acrylic, pastel, watercolor, gouache, pen and ink, etching, lithography, and the computer."

Success

Can an artist achieve success using a computer as a tool? Nessim says that although she still uses other mediums, about 85 percent of her work is now done on a computer. Her work has appeared on many covers, including Time, Arts and Architecture, and Byte, and the magazines featuring her work include Ms., Popular Computing, and Art News. Her work has appeared on a SIGGRAPH poster, and she did a New York subway poster, on computer, to advertise computer art classes at the School of Visual Arts. The seminars and conferences at which she speaks comprise a list too long to print, but her recent activities in that field have included SIGGRAPH, the Stanford Design Conference, the Art Center in Pasadena, and the Art Education and Technology Conference in Saint Paul. She has also had five one-woman shows.

While Nessim may have many ideas about hardware and software features that would be a boon to the artist, she is also living proof that existing technology can serve the artist well if it is viewed as a tool with properties that can be used as part of the creative material available to the artist.