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News Critic

**I**N THE 19th century, artists argued over such niceties as whether it was artistically proper to add opaque color to traditional transparent watercolors. In those days each medium's boundaries were jealously defended with a territorial ferocity worthy of wild beasts.

Today, obviously, it's another case altogether. If some holy directive were behind today's art it would read something like "multiply thy media and rejoice in the overflowing." We are so fully immersed in an age of media-mix and believe so heartily in the principles of artistic cross-fertilization that to protect old boundaries is often viewed as a serious breach of artistic conscience.

With the entry of electronic media into art a couple of decades back, more boundaries were shattered. Most noticeably, real space and illusionary space quickly became blurred. Film, it seemed, was already a believable substitute for reality. Video especially, from the very beginning, begged to be set out in actual space, to compete with real events. Film, even though more stuck in its old ways,

soon followed suit, even if a little clumsily. One very fertile result of this electronic media-merge is the large-scale gallery installation that incorporates everything from video and sound to language and still photography. These electrified environments exploit many of the virtues of environmental sculpture and overcome the "real time" limitations of the older form.

For the first time in its 13-year existence, Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center has commissioned media artists to create wholly-new installations designed especially for the gallery space. It is an event of great importance. It brings to the city original work of great complexity and scale by three New York City artists of established reputations, Ericka Beckman, Barbara Bloom and John Jesurun. The show will open with a reception for the artists and public on Saturday at 9 p.m.

These installations were not merely "installed" in the ordinary sense, but rather they necessitated a complete revamping of the gallery space. Barbara Bloom's installation, for example, is made up of four rooms set end to end, each room connected to the next by a central door.

Bloom calls the work "Esprit de l'Escalier." The title translates to "Spirit of the Stairs" and, says the artist, refers to the witty remark never made, only realized as one is descending "the inevitable staircase."

In the first room, photographs of figures engaged in various kinds of parapsychological activity line the walls — people levitating, walking on fire, that sort of thing. Various texts on "seeing" are printed in Braille over the images.

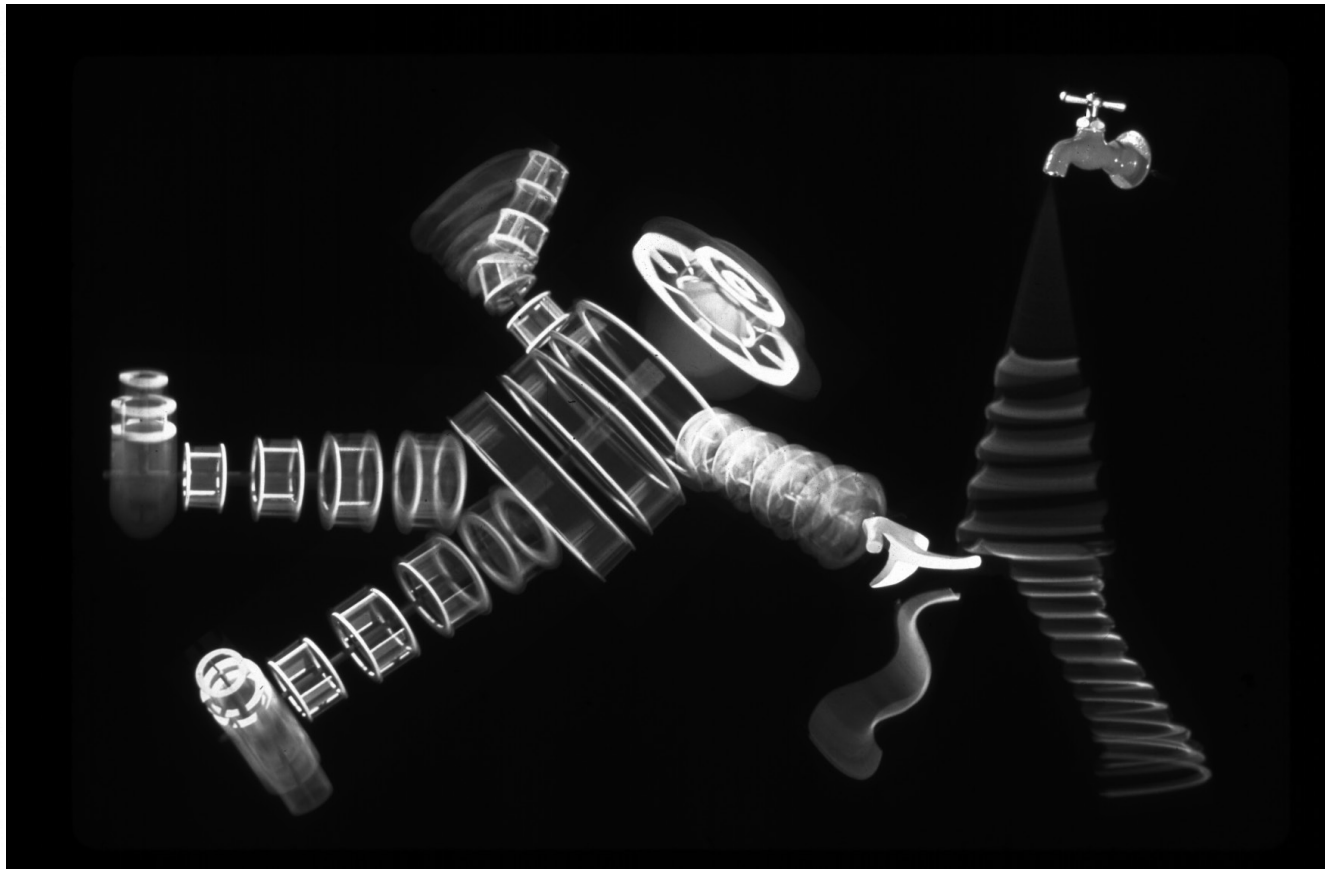
The room sets the theme of the work, says Bloom. How do we see? How do we believe or disbelieve what we see?

The second room continues the subject of the paranormal. But at first this room looks unexceptional. In the middle of the space sits a round table holding six plates. The plates are expensive and decorated with a single gold rim. Only closer inspection reveals images inlaid into the plates, photographs of seances.

In room three we are greeted by large pieces of paper illuminated from the rear by light boxes. The sheets are blank except for strange watermarks that look like UFOs.

We can't enter the final room, but only look at it from the entryway. The room is painted a blue-lavender.

See Media; Page G-4, Column 4



One of Ericka Beckman's robot-like works.

## Media

Continued from Page G-1

der color so that we have trouble telling where wall and floor meet. Floating in the air are a number of shapes that look like hats of various styles. Because the hats are made of gauze they seem to float like ghosts in the blueish light.

"I don't care if a person believes in the paranormal or not. It doesn't matter if I believe it or not," Bloom says. "If you believe, the things you see will look like 'proof'; if you don't, they will look like a sham. I'm dealing with what's visible and what's not visible, with belief and non-belief."

Ericka Beckman's darkened interior holds five mural-sized photographs. "Pictures," she says, will surround you. The images will be intermittently made visible by a computer-controlled sequence of illumination. "Essentially what you're seeing is an animated loop," Beckman explains. The loop is synchronized to a sound track.

"The near-lifesize figures resemble robots in motion, caught in the middle of a game — kind of a sports game — but a game not identified as baseball or hockey. Each figure is helping to create an object" that refers to some unnamed industry of the future. In this imagined future, cells will generate machinery the way organic cells grow to produce organisms.

Jesurun's installation, "Ojo Caliente" ("Hot Eye"), will use three

video monitors set within a small triangular-shaped room that is, as the artist says, a "little less than claustrophobic." A sequence of images — an eye, some roller-coaster footage, a man reading from a text — will be repeated, rotating among the three screens.

"Ojo Caliente" will be unlike Jesurun's other well-known pieces that are often built of a complex of broken conversations and outpourings of fractured jingles and sayings. "This is not at all a baroque-type installation," says the poet/dramatist and one-time producer for "The Dick Cavett Show." "I decided to keep this work contemplative."

The installations were selected by Hallwalls curator Catherine Howe and will be on view through May 13.