



ARTFORUM

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Nanotech Players Ericka Beckman - Bess Cutler Gallery

by Jude Schwendenwien

Through a series of color photographs and corresponding light- and sound-cues, Ericka Beckman transformed a room in this gallery into an uncommon environment that demonstrated the connection between technological processes and human learning. Each of the five large C-prints features one of the *Nanotech* players, hybrid creations of light and motion (captured by prolonged camera exposures), which resemble proposed robot designs from the 50's. Beckman, a filmmaker, is acutely aware of photographic possibilities, and she explores them with imagination and wit. Beckman stresses the significance of human creative potential, which ultimately supersedes advanced technology.

The artist set up the room as an arena of the imagination, utilizing various visual clues and symbols. Sequential movement was implied through a specific ordering of particular sounds transmitted through speakers. Since the sounds and lights worked together continuously within this limited space, the viewer who walked in during the midst of the segment became disoriented. In this dimly lit space, one heard the clanging of a bell followed by a group of sounds related to sports activity. After the sound stopped, the light flashed on to another photograph. It took a while to pick up on the correct order of the transition from the first photograph, in which an amorphous red blob is struck by a baseball bat, to the last, in which the blob is transformed into a birthday cake. In the first four photographs of the sequence, the *Nanotech* players act as catalysts for transferring and transforming the red object. Beckman deliberately slows down the viewer's cognitive processes, primarily through the exclusion of background data. As a result, the viewer is placed in a motor-sensory situation not unlike that of a child's world prior to the development of speech.

The *Nanotech* figures themselves have a toylike look to them. Each figure is composed of sticks and curved pieces of white foam core that spin on rotational discs during long photographic exposures. This technique gives the figures a sense of volume and the illusion of rapid movement. The only solid objects in the pieces are sports items, such as a baseball bat and a lasso; every other pictorial device remains a perceptual trick. In the first photograph, a *Nanotech* baseball player swings his bat like a whirling dervish, hitting the red ball into space while the soundtrack echoes sounds from a lively baseball game. The bell and light bring our attention to the second photograph, on an opposite wall, where the red ball becomes a stretched cylinder, which passes through a cornucopialike form used by the robotic equivalent of a jaijai player. Next we turn around and hear a whipping sound, symbolized in a photo by a flag waver. The figure's convoluted motion stretches the red shape into the unlikely final product: a gooey birthday cake with candles. The epilogue, or "cooling off" sequence, is in the fifth photograph, in which the robot washes one of its hands in water which comes from a real faucet within the photographic setup. The sound of gurgling water, combined with more abstract sounds from a synthesizer, accompanies the image.

In all the photographs, the pseudotechnological figure is set in motion by a creative human process, in which roles and actions are designated. Although Beckman shows us every step of the red object's transformation into a recognizable, seemingly edible object, there is nevertheless a magical sense of wonder to the entire system. She uses vivid sensations of light to appeal to our own childlike fascination with optical effects, and the sounds are eccentric, humorous, and recognizable enough to initiate a theater-of-the-mind experience in the viewer. Beckman demonstrates how people can perceive advanced technological systems through basic intuition, and thus she seems demystifies the notion that technology will exceed and overpower humanity. Her manipulations of time and space give her essay on the mutability of material objects a poetic rather than strictly analytical quality.