

Art review: 'The Mechanical Bride' at YoungProjects
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"The Mechanical Bride" features three artists, but substantially more bodies and visions come into play in this stimulating show at YoungProjects, a hotbed for innovative approaches to moving imagery.

Kurt Ralske reimagines films by a range of 20th century directors, tampering with their spatial and temporal characteristics to create something akin to extended paintings. John Carpenter's digital projections depend on the movement of viewers to activate their imagery's lyrical swell and flow. The show takes its name from Marshall McLuhan's 1951 book, which examines the media landscape (press, radio, movies, ads) through discrete critical entries that could be read in any order. In the work of Ralske and Carpenter, too, beginnings and ends factor little or not at all. All is rich, fluid middle, technological wizardry that delivers primal, sensual satisfaction.

Ralske, based in New York, meddles brilliantly with what he calls the "relics of cinematic history." He compresses Murnau's "Faust" into a three-minute, paradoxically slow and utterly intriguing montage summation. He renders Dreyer's "The Passion of Joan of Arc" as a single, densely abbreviated photographic print. The longest, brightest and slowest shots from three different Ozu films are extracted and become the building blocks for Ralske's own short, largely abstract loops that read as barely moving mosaics of pattern, tone and color — oozing inkblots, vibrating graphs, morphing stripes. Ralske is, ultimately, a high-tech sculptor of time, digitally manipulating given materials to evoke gorgeous visual texture and a stirring sense of dislocation.

Ralske also presents newly rediscovered snippets of work from the 1920s by German cinematographer Eugen Schüfftan, the third artist featured in the show.

Ralske futurizes the futurist by editing and recombining fragments of Schüfftan's experiments, motion studies in which characters' forms stutter and echo like Duchamp's descending nude, their continuous movement broken down into constituent parts shown in sequence, in reverse, and simultaneously. Tonal values intensify and reverse, so that some passages look like solarized photographs à la Man Ray, and others like bold, animated charcoal drawings.

Carpenter, based in L.A., stages occasions for give-and-take between the physical and optical. His installations (in the same general vein as those of his former teacher, Jennifer Steinkamp) involve projections of natural forms that gently pulse and flicker on their own but respond dynamically to the presence of viewers. Approaching the image of fields that spreads across two adjoining walls sends ripples through the wheat stalks and long-stemmed blossoms, a rhythmic current at once atmospheric and aquatic.

"Dandelion Clock" (until recently on view at ACME) is the stunner, a projected, free-floating orb of luminous spores that spins and throbs modestly until the viewer's proximity issues an invisible breath scattering the delicate, bright white sparks. They whoosh away from a spot of light at their gravitational core, answering the movement in front of them with the unified mind of a flock of birds or school of fish, then return home, re-gathering into a coherent whole. No doubt technically complex, the work exudes a simple, distilled beauty, as of poetry conflating the intimate and cosmic.