ARCHITECTURE NEWS

"Townhouse for a Musician" by Lynn Meyers, who was one of the committee members for the "Women in Architecture" symposium at the School of Architecture in March 1974. For a close-up look at Meyers and other committee members 10 years after the symposium, see inside.

The Medium Is the Message

by Bill Noblitt

Larry Cuba, B.A. '72, paints a world that's a moveable feast for experimental film buffs. His medium is not paint or clay but the computer, and his films do not tell stories nor represent reality. He doesn't work with preplanned scripts that chart the course of his art.

In this sense, his work is like abstract painting, and like abstract painting, his medium gives many different messages since the nature of his work sometimes defies clear-cut explanations.

"They're not Hollywood entertainment," he explains, "and they're not dramatic features."

Although his art may resist easy explanations, what he does has won him many experimental film awards and involved him in George Lucas' film "Star Wars." The short side trip into "Star Wars," which, by the way, had a script, was fun but is something he's not interested in trying again—at least, not right now. The briefing room scene in that movie—more specifically, the rotating schematic plans of the Death Star—helped the Rebels beat the Empire and helped Cuba make his mark.

Now he uses black-and-white computer images to create lines that move beautifully through space and time. These objects seemingly dance off the screen and become more and more complex. His trips into this other dimension have made him what Kodak Film calls one of the country's most respected computer animators.

A shot from Larry Cuba's six-minute film "3/78." A journey into the computer animator's nether world of dancing objects that move like a choreographer's dream.
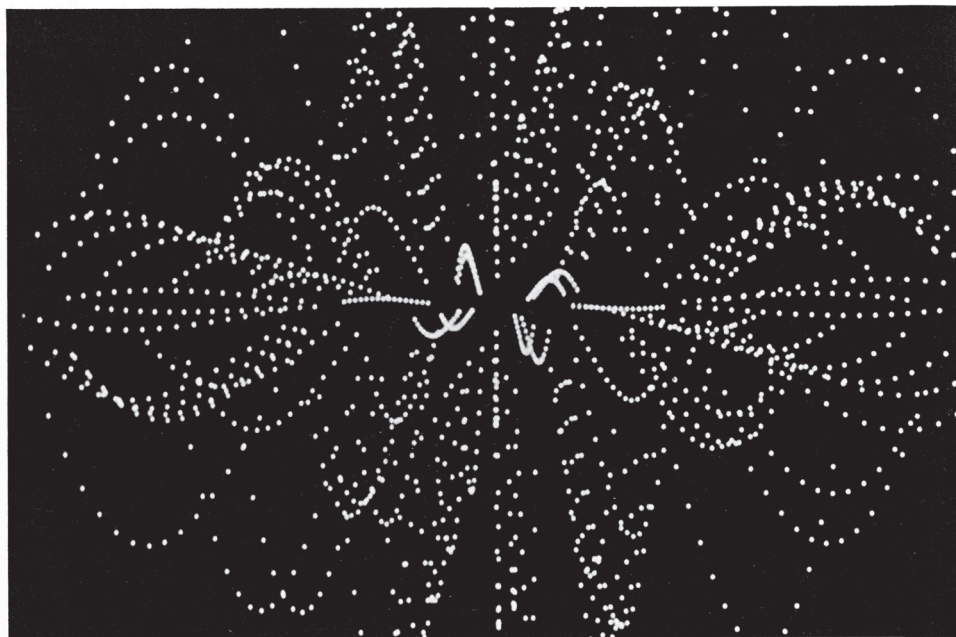

Computer animator Larry Cuba.

To get away from doing such things as special effects for television advertisements, Cuba left Hollywood and L.A.'s choking smog and traffic and moved to Santa Cruz, Calif. He is not interested in creating zooming hamburgers that shoot laser blasts of heartburn into the guts of Americans. Instead, he is interested in computer animation as art and in the form and structure of his art.

Form and structure were the things that made him want to study architecture at Washington University in the first place. Those and a strong interest in mathematics. While a student here, he took a short course in computers where he learned to program in Fortran. "If only I had known then that I could have created images on those computers, I might have gotten started a lot sooner," he says.

Why did he not become an architect? "It wasn't an easy decision, but the idea of using computers for the purpose of art really grabbed me." But this art grabbed him seemingly out of the dark since he had seen few computer-animated films and had read but a few magazine articles.

With a sense of adventure, he left St. Louis and journeyed west to seek John Whitney, Sr., a pioneer computer animator, and ended up enrolling at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), where he got his MFA in 1974. At CalArts he sharpened his computer and math skills and was granted time on a research facility's computer to develop his first short film, "First Fig." He also worked with his mentor Whitney, who earlier had developed the slit-scan effect used in the Star Gate sequence at the end of "2001: A Space Odyssey."

Those were busy times for Cuba since he not only learned about computer animation but also something about the graveyard shift. "I had to change my scheduling habits since I slept during the day and then worked on borrowed computer time from 8 p.m. until 8 a.m."

In 1977, he went to the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle to work on yet another computer (each of his films has been produced on a different system), and completed "3/78." When he returned to Los Angeles, he used still another company's computer to produce his last film "Two Space." He no longer has to beg, borrow, or steal time to do his work; he has his own system.

Currently, he's using this computer system to work on a new film under a grant from the American Film Institute. Always the experimenter, he's developing a computer language for frame-by-frame filmmaking.

He creates his art by painstakingly developing a program for an image, which involves a complex dialog with the computer. Often, he does not know where his efforts will lead him. "I see my films," he says, "as a form of discovery. I don't storyboard or design a film, then sit down and make a computer execute the designs—which is the way commercials are done. I enjoy not knowing what the final images will look like and discovering something that may go beyond what I visualize. I suspect I would lose interest in a film if it were entirely predesigned; I really am an experimenter at heart."

He's also an artist whose palette and brush are the computer keyboard and tube that flash out moving and dancing objects in black and white.

His art has color, though. "I've had several people tell me that they see hues of color after watching one of my films. I can't tell you what colors specifically they mention since each one sees a different color each time. It's an optical illusion."

Cuba's illusions take viewers to the nether world of imagination. There, they experience something of an abstract painting in motion. Through this medium, they understand computer animation as an art form. That's the message.