

REVIEW

WHAT: "Art of the Encyclopedic"

WHEN: Through March 29

WHERE: Carnegie Art Center, 240 Goundry St., North Tonawanda.

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 694-4400

Know it all

'Art of the Encyclopedic' smacks of the information age

BY RICHARD HUNTINGTON
News Critic

At first look, "Art of the Encyclopedic" might seem a show that hinges on the now-quaint notion that the vast reaches of knowledge of this age can somehow be summarized in a form that can be assimilated by ordinary mortals stuck with the biblical three-score-and-10 lifespan.

But this happy illusion doesn't last. This show is about many things, but one of them isn't the workability of traditional encyclopedic methods.

On the contrary, these eight artist or artist teams go about calling into question the viability of accepted bodies of knowledge or create new, sometimes arbitrary systems of information-gathering and presentation.

As conceived by guest curator Paul H. Vanouse, this is anything but a dry, academic pursuit. I guarantee that no chroniclers before Jennifer and Kevin McCoy thought to assemble a "guide to life" ("How I learned") from the old "Kung Fu" television series.

This outrageous archive — accessible through carefully cataloged CDs and a wall-mounted viewer — contains such "lessons" as "how to feel pain," "how to use funny sounds" and, in a section labeled "Capitalism and Violence," "how to exploit workers." In the McCoy's hands, the encyclopedic urge becomes an amusing — but

hardly trivial — critique of civilization as seen through one of its more ephemeral products.

➔ Meanwhile, Brian Collier ("I'll Have a Starling") reveals the underlying futility of documentation. Purposefully excessive, the installation marshals texts, maps, charts, photographs, sound, a clunky motorized object, even a starling preserved in a jar.

The starling itself is a metaphor for nature at its most hyperbolic. Its alarming migratory success and its aggression toward more desirable birds has earned this noisy creature human disdain. Collier documents all this in scientific-looking charts and illustrates its frenetic congregating habits in photos. He shows trees blackened with birds as actually caught by the camera and — in a move that has aesthetic implications — alters photographs by adding masses of hand-drawn black dots.

Collier ranges over varied human responses in pursuit of his starling — from Mozart's pet starling that might have inspired the erratic melodies of "A Musical Joke" (which we hear, plus a starling's song) to Shakespeare's talking starling in "King Henry IV, Part I." A brilliant work, it indicts the vanity behind the encyclopedic even as it uses its techniques to reveal opposing modes of thought. ◀

Two of the three digital-based works in the show actively oppose the linear, accumulative approach of encyclopedic thinking. Caroline Koebel's "Paraiso" (Web site/video) focuses on a couple dancing to "Salsa Con Coco" through motion sequences accessed from the Web site, while the more dramatic video digitally abstracts the same material.

Natalie Bookchin, in "Databank of the Everyday" (CD-ROM), not only uses the loop in her inventory of common gestures and actions, but proclaims "THE LOOP IS THE MOVEMENT OF THE 21st CENTURY." I couldn't determine how much irony was intended in these works. In any case, both inadvertently reveal that, even with variables of action and access, the loop is inherently boring.

The third digital work, "Tetra-gramma" by Omar and Carlos Estrada, is intriguing for its surprising thesis. Projected and on-monitor texts of ancient sacred writings scroll past at a glacial pace. Letters in these texts are highlighted — letters that purport to show correspondances between the ancient names for God and DNA sequences. The project is an outlandish textural argument that God and DNA have the same source — a twin birth that created life material and its creator at one burst.

Back on terra firma, Julia Dzwonkoski ("The Museum of the Double") and Igor Vamosi ("Twin Collection") both deal in doubling as a common life phenomenon. These collections of objects are equally amusing, but Dzwonkoski's has more wit and subtlety.

On a more somber note, Ra'ad Walid's "The Atlas Group" is a documentation of the recent history of Lebanon, these particular images concentrating on the car bombings. Each photo has at its center a blackened, twisted object that, for all we can tell, just fell from the sky. That this strange object is a car engine flung far afield by the blast only accentuates the ambiguity inherent in photo documentation: Its tendency to displace reality and slide toward a dream state.

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Brian Collier's "I'll Have a Starling" uses a starling preserved in a jar as a metaphor for nature at its most hyperbolic.