

**SFGATE** <http://www.sfgate.com/art/article/Art-and-technology-a-tricky-pairing-6687499.php>

# Art and technology a tricky pairing

By **Charles Desmarais** Updated 11:03 am, Thursday, December 10, 2015



Photo: Courtesy The Artists

---

Jim Campbell and Jane Rosen, "Coffee Stains" (2015), a collaborative work combining sumi-e ink, coffee and wash on a glass panel, with custom electronics and LEDs.

---

Jim Campbell's mini-survey exhibition at San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art reveals the romantic side of high-tech art. When did engineering become so tenderhearted?

Alongside Janet Cardiff's soul-stirring "The Forty Part Motet," at Fort Mason's new

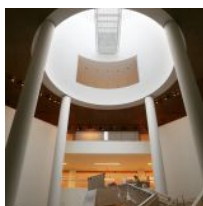
Gallery 308, Campbell's work prompts us to wonder whether technology, in the hands of the right artists, might reveal as much about our inner selves as it does the external world.

Campbell is a widely respected San Francisco artist whose best-known works (a short introductory video can be found [here](#)) include large light constellations presented in the trees of New York's Madison Square Park (2010-11), hung high in the atrium of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2011-12) or ribboned across the ceiling at the San Diego Airport (2010-13). These glimmering installations of pulsing LEDs, visually attractive and spatially immersive even at first glance, gradually resolve into images when seen from certain angles: passersby on city streets, dancers, swimmers.

## MORE BY CHARLES DESMARAIS



**Rewarding  
exhibitions by  
Tavares Strachan  
and Barry McGee**



**10 upcoming Bay  
Area art projects**



**Bay Area art world  
prepares for year  
of promise and  
challenges**

His current show, a partial recap of a [2014 presentation](#) at Hosfelt Gallery, also introduces new works made in collaboration with another artist, Jane Rosen. The whole of those objects doesn't quite add up to the sum of their parts. Rosen's abstract cast-glass plaques and her classic drawing of a horse on translucent glass are not improved by the addition of Campbell's flickering backlight, and her images, lovely on their own, only obfuscate his usual clarity. But the new pieces express a yearning for emotional content impossible to ignore.

Campbell's more accustomed practice is to parse visual information into ever smaller elements, reducing his pictures to the absolute threshold of readability.

How many dots in a halftone reproduction, how many pixels on a monitor add up to a portrayal of grandpa? Paradoxically, the more detail eliminated, the more universal the image: no longer recognizable as an individual, it comes to stand for "older gentleman," then "man" and, finally, "person."

An anonymous home movie Campbell finds on eBay is atomized, and thus expanded,

into the story of all families, and then our own family. We are left with simultaneous feelings of what is lost — the individual — and a lingering essence of the intimate.



---

**IMAGE 1 OF 2**

Gwynned Vitello listens to sound artist Janet Cardiff's installation "The Forty Part Motet," at Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture through Jan. 18.

---

### **An overpowering sensation**

Intimacy is the overpowering sensation produced by "The Forty Part Motet," as well. Audio speakers are arranged in a circle, controlled by sophisticated hardware to reproduce 40 singers' voices. As the work is played, each of the 40 speakers broadcasts an individual singer's voice; each black box on a metal stand is a person, with personally identifiable modulation, pronunciation and quirks. At the center of the circle, the music blends into a chorus of prayer and praise. Drawing close, we hear the frailty of each singer — slight timing and tonal errors, lisps and expectorations — that we could never hear but in the most physically familiar of circumstances, much less in a live performance.

Which explains the ultimate failure of what seemed a promising effort when the

Contemporary Jewish Museum announced “NEAT: New Experiments in Art and Technology,” an exhibition that runs through Jan. 17. The show aspires to update the groundbreaking efforts of Experiments in Art and Technology, or “E.A.T.,” a loosely organized membership organization that brought together artists and engineers in the 1960s and ’70s for performances, exhibitions and publications.

Let’s set aside the outsized ambition of the CJM project, a single show that could not possibly approximate the breadth of E.A.T., a long-term international effort with, at times, substantial corporate funding. That’s a practical matter. More crippling is “NEAT’s” embrace of gimcrackery over substance, a flaw more acceptable back in the day when E.A.T. bore witness to what it saw as the dawn of a new day.

Context is everything in a group exhibition. Even Jim Campbell’s contribution to the CJM show, a piece he successfully redesigned as a more compact work for San Jose, looks lightweight here, in an environment compromised by several installations that offer little more than one-off jokes and large, 2015 versions of lava lamps and Etch A Sketch.

Technology, in and of itself, is a sterile pursuit. Successfully partnered with art, however, it can make us more deeply feel our humanity.

*Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle’s art critic. E-mail: [cdesmarais@sfgate.com](mailto:cdesmarais@sfgate.com) Twitter: Artguy1*

**Jim Campbell: New Work and Collaborations with Jane Rosen:** 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 12 p.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Through Feb. 7. San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, 560 South First Street, San Jose. (408) 283-8155. [www.sjica.org](http://www.sjica.org)

**The Forty Part Motet:** Noon-8 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday. Through Jan. 18. Free; advance tickets recommended. Gallery 308, Ft. Mason Center for Arts and Culture, 2 Marina Blvd., S.F. (415) 345-7575. [www.fortmason.org/event/forty-part-motet](http://www.fortmason.org/event/forty-part-motet)

**NEAT: New Experiments in Art and Technology:** 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday-Tuesday;

11 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursday. Through Jan. 17. Contemporary Jewish Museum, 736 Mission St., S.F. (415) 655-7800. [www.theejm.org](http://www.theejm.org)

© 2015 Hearst Communications, Inc.

**H E A R S T**