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ART



IRIS SCHNEIDER / Los Angeles Times

"I had spent so much of my life looking at the television screen, to actually usurp it was quite a feeling," says Tony Oursler, pictured with "Side Effects" (1998).

By SUZANNE MUCHNIC

Twenty years and three months ago, Tony Oursler introduced himself to hard-core aficionados of Los Angeles' contemporary art scene in a bare-bones setting. Those who found their way to Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions—an "alternative space" then housed above a shabby downtown bridal shop—saw two low-budget videotapes by the 22-year-old artist, fresh out of CalArts.

One tape, "Diamond Head," was an X-rated soap opera about a disastrous marriage. The other, "The Weak Bullet," followed the path of a bullet as it snuffed out one nasty argument after another. Together, the two works offered a glimpse of a promising artist who used a light touch, dark humor, hand-made dolls and painted props to deliver biting social commentary. Tapping into the weirdness of everyday life in a world hooked on television, he was definitely on to something.

Oursler returned to his native New York in 1981, a year after his show at LACE, and proceeded to distinguish himself as a pioneering synthesizer of video, sculpture, performance art and recorded monologues. His spooky eyeballs, pathetic characters—made by projecting images of human faces on sculptural forms and making them whine, cajole and bark out orders—effectively suck video images out of their usual boxes and set them free in galleries and

A PROJECTION OF THE IMAGINATION

By throwing video images onto inanimate objects, artist Tony Oursler explores the tube's takeover of our lives.

museums. Meanwhile, his work has become a staple of the international art scene, appearing three times at Documenta—the periodic survey of contemporary art in Kassel, Germany—and in leading museums all over America and Europe.

Now he's back in L.A., at the Museum of Contemporary Art's splendid digs, with his largest exhibition to date: "Introjection: Tony Oursler Mid-Career Survey 1976-1999," which opens today. Named for the artist's interest in the assimilation of thoughts and behaviors from television and film, the show was organized by the Williams College Museum of Art in

Williamstown, Mass. The 85 works track his evolution from narrative videos to complex mixed-media installations.

"It's amazing to see what's happened in Los Angeles since I left," Oursler said as he supervised the installation of his exhibition—in galleries that didn't exist during his student days. MOCA was founded in 1979, but its main building on Grand Avenue didn't open until 1986. Recalling a period 20 years ago when there were few local showcases even for his celebrated professors at CalArts, Oursler said that

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L.A. is now widely acknowledged as a major art center.

Walking through the galleries where his show was taking shape, Oursler pointed out "Side Effects," an eerie group of projected faces, and seminal works. "The Watching," a mixed-media installation with video projection made for Documenta in 1992, was a breakthrough because of its use of small video projectors.

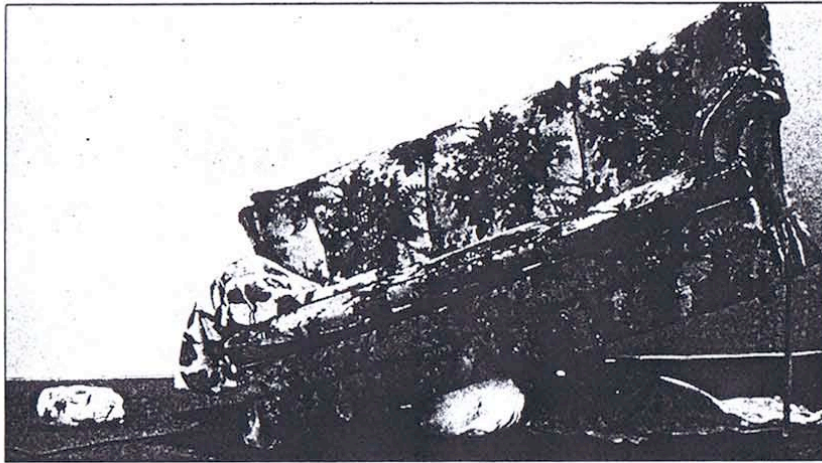
"When I discovered that I could use these projectors to make video effigies or dummies or dolls, it enabled me to take these characters out of the television set and develop them further. I started to work with figures in terms of empathy tests on the audience," he said, referring to dolls that cry and dummies that yell at passersby.

One work that grabs attention is "Getaway #2," in which the stuffed-pillow head of a life-size female dummy is wedged under a mattress. The face projected onto the pillow grimaces, rolls its eyes and snarls. "Hey you, get out of here" and makes unprintable threats. "For me, the interesting thing is that she tells you to get away, so the first thing you want to do is stay," Oursler said.

Long fascinated with psychological effects of electronic media, Oursler has been particularly concerned with the balance between awareness of media and immersion in it during the last 10 years. "There is always that fine line of whether you are using media as a way of growing or a way of escaping, or whether you are even aware of what's happening when you turn it on," he said. "I think it's really important for people to be aware, so that's an important dynamic of what I am trying to do."

That has led him to explore the phenomenon known as multiple-personality disorder "as a kind of metaphor for the way we move from one identity to the next by channel shifting or surfing on the Internet and taking on different identities," he said. One major work that emerged from that research is "Judy," a 1994 installation that marks the beginning of Oursler's use of tacky domestic furnishings with a figure.

"It's kind of humorous because there are maybe 25 different patterns of floral cloth that become the unifying factor for the character, who changes personality from one end of the installation to another," he said. "She changes from a doll into a lump of fabric, into a curtain, into a kind of adult fetus projected onto the stomach of a dress, into a bouquet of flowers that's like a horrible screaming mother, into a passive-aggressive character that's wedged under a



MOCA at California Plaza

A detail of "Judy," the 1994 installation in which Oursler first used tacky domestic furnishings with a figure.

couch harassing the people around her." The final component of "Judy" is an overstuffed chair in which visitors can sit and use a joystick to control a figure in the museum's lobby.

Born in New York City and raised in nearby Nyack, Oursler is the second of five children in a Catholic family. Although he is the clan's famous artist, Oursler believes his siblings are more creative than he and attributes his talents to his progenitors. "At a certain point, you just realize you are an amalgam of your influences," he said.

As for his literary inclinations—which appear in fragmented story lines of his videos—his paternal grandfather, Fulton Oursler, was the author of "The Greatest Story Ever Told," the 1949 retelling of the life of Jesus. His paternal grandmother, Grace Perkins, was an author and screenwriter whose credits include the film "Night Nurse." Tony's father, also named Fulton, is a former editor of Reader's Digest.

"My mom's side of the family is the visual side," Oursler said. His mother, Noel, is a painter who is actively involved with the preservation of historic theaters and other buildings. Her mother's sister, Oursler's great-aunt, Zita Mellon, was a Sunday painter who taught art in a studio in South Carolina. "She was a really important figure in my life; she really got me going," Oursler said.

Unlike many budding artists who are discouraged by relatives who try to persuade them to go into a more practical line of work, Oursler belongs to a family that has always supported his artistic aspirations. On his 17th birthday, his father took him to the St. Regis Hotel in New York to meet Surrealist painter Salvador Dali, who was

a regular customer at the bar.

Nonetheless, getting an education at CalArts—a hot new art school when he arrived in 1976—was a fluke. Oursler first heard of CalArts from painter Korra Raffose, his art teacher at Rockland Community College. "It's a small two-year school near New York City, which means it has really awesome faculty," Oursler said. "Korra, who encouraged me to work seriously, told me that I should go to California. He said there was a school out there that had just recently formed, and all these guys he knew were working there."

"I thought, 'Oh my God, I can't go to California.' Everyone I knew was going to the Rhode Island School of Design. I had this image of pot-smoking, van-driving guys who dropped out and went to California."

"This guy came into my life who really knew something about contemporary art and knew the most interesting artists. But I was just a kid. I didn't know who these people were. So I applied to the Rhode Island School of Design."

As part of his admission test there, Oursler was required to draw a shoe. "I was supposed to draw it in 20 minutes. Of course, I spent three days on it," he said. "Then I sent the drawing to them and got turned down. I was crestfallen, but when I told Korra, he said, 'Well, maybe that's not a bad thing. I really do think you should go to California.' When I look back, it's just horrifying that my decision about where I went to school was all based on drawing this charcoal sketch of a boot. I had no idea what was going on."

Oursler was in for another shock when he got to Valencia in 1976. "CalArts at that time was very isolated, far from the city. There wasn't even a movie theater," he said. "There were very few stu-

dents and just these cinder-block walls and fluorescent lights. I think of it as an incubation chamber. I was hoping for some kind of insane release—youth culture, giant university mixers, rock concerts, stuff like that. But it was the perfect thing—I needed that kind of isolation and immersion. It was an incredible growing experience."

Conceptualist John Baldessari and performance artist Laurie Anderson were on the faculty, and avant-garde composer John Cage was an artist in residence, Oursler recalled, but he was only beginning to learn about their accomplishments. "I had a Jasper Johns book and a Rauschenberg book, and I was into the Surrealists, but I was fairly ignorant," he said.

Oursler arrived as an aspiring painter, but his first instructor, John Mandell, introduced him to the possibilities of videotape. "It was a magic moment for me when I picked up a video camera, being the TV-generation person I am. I didn't know that there was any way outside of a television studio that you could actually put something on TV. I had never seen a VCR or a video camera. They had been on the market for 10 years, but few people had them," he said.

"For me it was just incredible that you could shoot something and play it back immediately—and that I could put something into the space that was indelibly burned into my retina. I had spent so much of my life looking at the television screen, to actually usurp it was quite a feeling. For me it was really a lucky situation to be able to jump outside of history and work with this medium. Here was another rectangle where I could make my images and I didn't have to compete with this endless stream of characters from history. I

immediately fused my painting interests with television and just kept doing it."

Initially, Oursler's curiosity about portrayals of sex and violence on television led him to concentrate on contemporary issues. "I thought it was really important to speak to people in a vernacular that they can understand about things that they can relate to in their daily life," he said. "But then I started to get really interested in the invention of what I call mimetic devices, things that mirror consciousness, why they were invented and how they operate psychically. That led me into taking a long look back into history."

The result—his most extensive research project to date—is published in the exhibition catalog, in an annotated time line titled "I hate the dark. I love the light." It tracks the history of the camera obscura and subsequent mimetic devices from the 5th century BC, when Chinese philosopher Mo Ti described the pinhole of the camera obscura as a "collection place" and a "locked treasure room." The first piece to emerge from that investigation is "Optics," an installation of video projections, a camera obscura, rainbows and images of devils and angels.

Another recent work is "Fantastic Prayers," a CD-ROM that has been in process for four years and is being shown in its final form for the first time at MOCA. Describing the work as "a compendium of ideas about the balance between formation and entropy" and "a map of virtual spaces where different things happen," Oursler said it contains eight sections, including a place where lost objects go and another where walls talk. Created in collaboration with writer Constance DeJong and composer Stephen Vitiello and produced by the Dia Center for the Arts in New York, the CD-ROM will eventually be available for purchase.

"That's been a dream of mine ever since I was at CalArts," he said. "One of the main impulses of video art in the '70s was that television could be a way of getting artwork right into people's homes. There was a long, failed experiment of that in the '80s, and it was sort of given up in the '90s. Now, with the Internet, people can Web-cast their videotapes to the world and bypass the monolithic monopoly that television was. It's a very optimistic time for video art and media art in general." □

• Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave. Ends July 30. (213) 626-6222.

Suzanne Muchnic is *The Times'* art writer.