Not only computing — also art

John Lansdown

As regular readers will know, over the past few years I have been involved in teaching and examining a large number of students who try to use computers in their art and design work.

Apart from being impressed by the obvious quality of much of this, I have been struck by its immense and unexpected variety. Just in the last year, for instance, I have looked at an experimental expert system incorporating the design rules of the Russian avant-garde artist, El Lissitzky; at a new computer animation system; at new digital letter-forms; at sculptures that only exist as computer models; at computer-based ways of creating Islamic patterns; at a neural network approach to designing buildings; and at countless films, videos and artworks which owe their existence to paint systems or programming ingenuity. I have not, I grant you, seen as much as I would like in the area of computer application that interests me most: the use of computing to *generate* art or design works. This means using the computer as an intelligent assistant rather than as a tool or medium. Nonetheless, I have seen enough to realise that the role of computing in design is profound and its scope wide reaching.

Of mice and menus

By the time this issue of the *Bulletin* is in your hands, you will have the chance to see some of this quality and variety for yourselves. Students who have been on the Postgraduate Diploma Course in Graphic Design and Computers at Central St Martin's School of Art are holding the first exhibition of their work at the Lethaby Gallery in Southampton Row, London WC1. Among other things you will be able to see a theatrical event with computer images on the theme of Berlin Dada, the mapping of the constellations

of the northern hemisphere onto a 3D dome using Hypercard, video animation and transparencies of computer graphics images derived from natural forms, Islamic design and Escher, and much more. Appropriately enough the exhibition is called 'Of Mice and Menus' and it is hoped that it will be seen at additional venues outside London later in the year. Small samples of the types of imagery on show are illustrated in Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4.

The Postgraduate Diploma course has been running for about five years and is specially designed to cater for practising graphic designers. It is thus taught in a flexible modular fashion in the evenings and weekends. And, as one who taught on it knows, it's hard work for staff and students alike. It owes its inspiration and structure to Gillian Crampton Smith who is now at the Royal College of Art. She is to be congratulated on setting up such a challenging and useful course. Long may it continue under its new leader, Alan Baines.

In view of the controversy over realism and computer graphics, of special interest in the exhibition are the paintings by Ben Johnson, who is undoubtedly the finest architectural illustrator alive today. Ben has an extremely realistic technique of a quality which no computer can touch — as can be seen from the painting of a room in Chateau Margeaux shown in Figure 5. He attended the course and has begun to use computer plotting to help him set up the perspective views which he uses in his paintings. Thus Figure 6 shows a computer plot of the new wine store for Chateau Lafite in Bordeaux, and Figure 7, the final painted result. Both the paintings are 2 × 3 metres in size and are quite beautiful (although I am not sure that the originals will be on show).
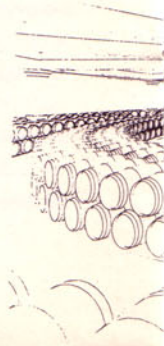
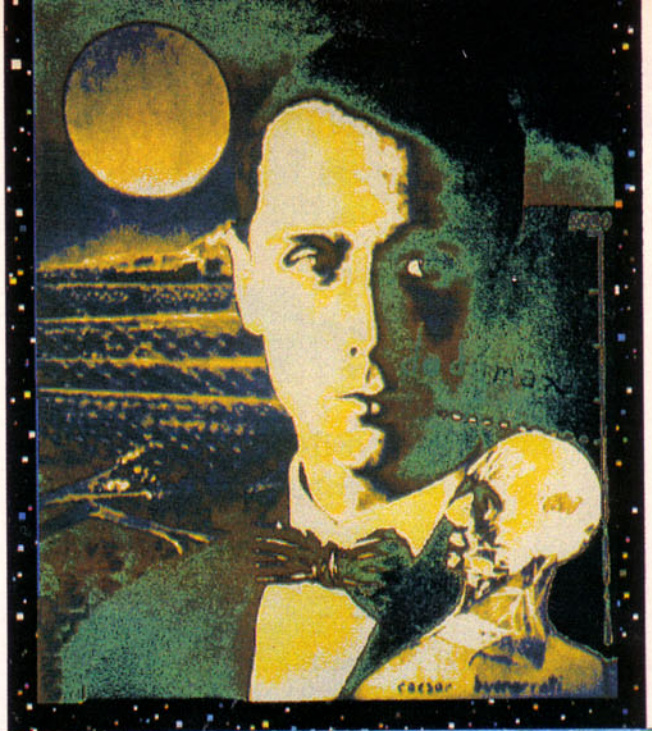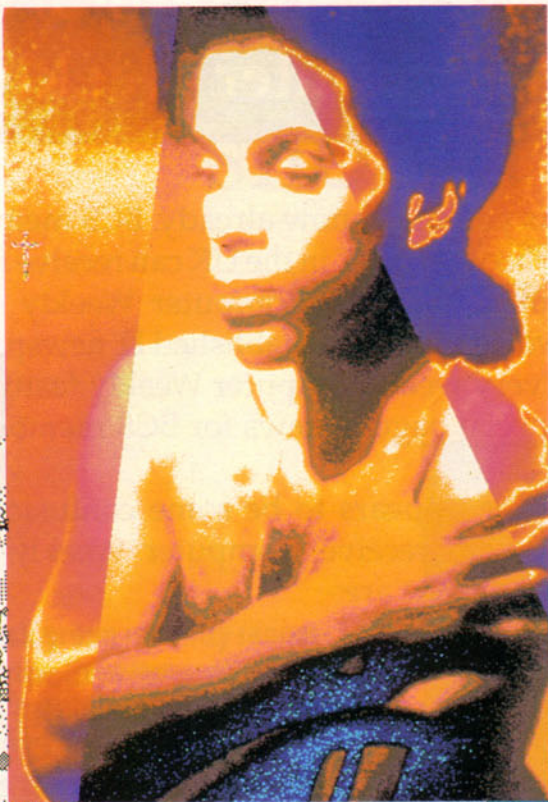Please see the exhibition if you can. I think you will be surprised and stimulated by the results.

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