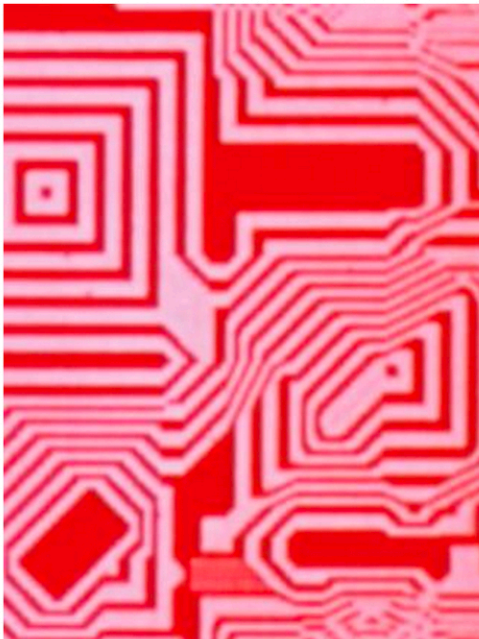REVIEWS DEC. 06, 2016

Lillian Schwartz

NEW YORK,
at Magenta Plains

by Wendy Vogel

Lillian Schwartz:
Pixillation, 1970,
video, 4 minutes; at
Magenta Plains.

Human-size mainframe computers and magnetic tape storage units, a clunky light pen, cathode-ray tube monitors, film reels: these were the tools that Lillian Schwartz used to make experimental films and graphics at Bell Laboratories in the 1970s. In 1976, Bell Labs' parent company, AT&T, produced a short documentary on Schwartz, who worked at the research and development technology company from 1968 to 2001. On view in Schwartz's exhibition at Magenta Plains—her first solo show since a presentation in an Arizona computer lab twenty years ago—the film, titled *The Artist and the Computer*, shows Schwartz toiling in the techie trenches by day and consulting art history books by night. This false divide, perpetuated by the art world, between commercial and creative labor may be partly why Schwartz, who joined Experiments in Art & Technology (E.A.T.) in 1966 and participated in the groundbreaking 1968–69 Museum of Modern Art exhibition "The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age," has long been sidelined in the art world.

The Magenta Plains exhibition featured the artist's computer-related works on paper and a dazzling selection of sixteen films, with the earliest pieces dating from 1969. On the ground floor, a television played the Schwartz documentary and Schwartz's 1984 Emmy Award–winning computer-animated advertisement for MoMA's new wing. Among the framed works surrounding the monitor were two gridded drawings (*Abstract #8* and *Hippy*, both 1969) that look like studies for computer animations, as well as works that explore art historical subject matter. A computer-processed photographic print from 1969, for instance, portrays, in five stacked frames, a reclining nude female figure, while two etchings for integrated circuits from 1970—both titled *Homage to Duchamp (Nude Descending a Staircase)*—reference an avant-garde masterwork.

The films, transferred to DVD, were shown on a loop in the gallery's basement. For these works, Schwartz collaborated with programmers, experimental musicians, and even environmental specialists, combining analog and digital methods. Many of the films can be viewed in both 2D and, using ChromaDepth glasses, 3D. *Pixillation* (1970), the earliest in the sequence, retains an experimental energy, with rapid editing and a rhythmic Moog synthesizer track by composer Gershon Kingsley. The four-minute film mixes computer-generated pixel patterns, shot on black-and-white stock and colored by filters, with images of growing crystals and time-lapse photographs of hand-painted abstract swirls. *Mutations* (1972) also brings together natural and man-made phenomena, with sections devoted to laser patterns, gem growth, and random patterning. Audio by computer-music composer and Bell Labs analyst Jean-Claude Risset switches from organic, spacey ambient tones to what sounds like a video game track. *Googolplex* (1972) features flickering black-and-white patterns (which appear, at times, to register optically as full-spectrum color); the imagery is accompanied by Schwartz's own remix of an audiotape of African villagers' music. Later films show the artist turning her attention more to organic forms, as in *Papillons* (1973), a meditative flow of morphing shapes suggesting butterflies and lava-lamp blobs.

As with many tech pioneers, Schwartz's underlying motives remain humanist, even spiritual. But sometimes the results of her efforts to humanize technology miss the mark. *Lily's Sea* (2013), one of three films on view made after the 1970s, shows a succession of neon-colored, psychedelically patterned forms, often mutating into one another—a flat landscape sprouts mountains, from which oceanic creatures crop up that, in turn, became floating orbs and wormlike organisms, and so on. In the final segment, the action culminates with a number of digital scans of human faces embedded in rugged terrain. Swirling through a dark abyss, these visages suggest citizens of the uncanny valley rather than the global village.