



**Joseph Nechvatal** *vOluptuary drOid décOlletage*, 2002, computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas, 167.6 x 304.8 cm.

## **Joseph Nechvatal at Universal Concepts Unlimited**

- by Joe Lewis, in the March 2003 issue of *Art in America*, pp.123-124

In the artist/theorist tradition of Robert Smithson, Joseph Nechvatal, a pioneer in the field of digital image making, challenges our perceptions of nature by altering conventional notions of space and time, gender, and self.

His recent exhibition, titled "vOluptuary: an algorithmic hermaphroditism," presented six "robotically assisted" paintings on canvas; he uses organic pigments suspended in an acrylic lacquer binder and a commercial large-format printer. In addition, a continuous, real-time artificial-intelligence performance was displayed on a monitor at the front desk.

Conceptually, the suite of paintings is loosely based on Ovid's sensual musings in the *Metamorphoses* about melding male and female forms to create the Hermaphrodite. Nechvatal's central images, usually symmetrically stacked in transparent planes of earth tones and violet, consist of scrambled and recombined male and female genitalia. The supersaturated environments shift between representation and abstraction, creating unfamiliar but recognizable entities. The images have been infected and transmogrified by computer viruses – programmatic anomalies designed by the artist and inserted into the picture files. The results evoke Rorschach-test symmetry and films like the *Matrix*. The work explores, through the amalgamation of body parts, the relationships between the virtual and actual, or the "viractual," in the artist's coinage.

In "the birth Of the viractual," the central labia lurk beneath a shimmering acrylic surface - as if we were looking through ripples made by Ovid's Salmacis diving into the pool after Hermaphroditus. Anchored by a translucent Rothko-like stripe of plasma red, and crowned by a frieze whose dentils evoke an abstracted DNA mitosis motif, the composition is framed by quasi-architectural elements reminiscent of Pompeian frescos.

Nechvatal continues to blur male and female in "vOluptuary drOid décOlletage" (the capital O, he says, represents being open, in the ready position). On top of seething layers of fractal patterns and barely recognizable bits of alphabetic programmatic code, anatomically recombined entities endlessly mutate.

A static column offers a spirited homage to Barnett Newman's "zips" and effectively stops the works leftward movement.

In the piece on the monitor, a virus slowly erases images from Nechvatal's repertory. Similar to the munching action of Pac-Man, the virus attacks colors or forms until the entire image is removed. Never repeating an attack strategy, this seemingly thinking agent takes ten to fifteen minutes to complete its pictorial annihilation.

It is difficult to believe that it's been little more than a decade since cyberspace, interactive media and the Web became robust creative areas. For artists, the discovery of this new space has probably created more problems than solutions; few have gotten beyond the "wow, look what I can do when I push this button" stage. The real challenge is to create something truly fresh. Nechvatal is one of a handful who have successfully plunged into the depths where art, technology and theory meet.