John F. Simon Jr.
COLLEZIONE MARAMOTTI

The centerpiece of John F. Simon Jr.'s exhibition "Outside In: Ten Years of Software Art," seems to be an explosion of the guts of the machine. The multicolor cabinet housing *Visions*, 2009, is painted in vivid acrylic with dynamic diamond motifs that transfix the gaze on a bright focal center, while the rest seems to whirl in a kaleidoscopic vortex. The mesmerizing illusion is deepened by continually changing geometry projected from an interior LCD screen onto mirrors visible through apertures on either side. As you are drawn closer and peer inside, you can see your own face reflected back as if in a fun-house mirror.

John F. Simon Jr., *Visions* (detail), 2009, custom software, wood, plastic laminate, acrylic paint, mirrored plastic, LCD screen, computer.
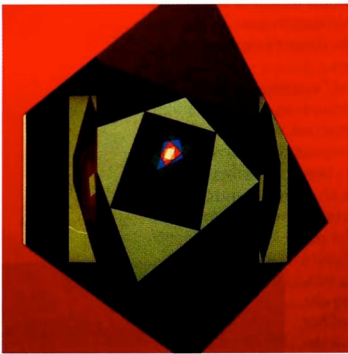
The five works in the show, projected on computer screens of varying vintage, are diverse reflections of programming language rendered into mellifluously flowing imagery. The most self-conscious and least successful is the rather literal *Endless Bounty*, 2005, a statement on consumer society in which various commodities—chairs, SUVs, skyscrapers, even abstract paintings—appear and dissolve one after the other on a Macintosh G4 PowerBook screen displayed on virtual shelves. *PDA*, 2001, is simply an oversize model of a generic handheld device that projects morphing Pop-inspired floral compositions. The earliest, *CPU (Central Processing Unit or Color Pattern Unit)*, 1999, generates geometric color combinations through a set of rules aimed to inspire visual categorization: After watching infinite permutations of colors, we tend to organize them into patterns of like elements, just as we try to find causality in the randomness of life events.

The beauty of these 3-D electronic works is that you have to encounter them in person, seemingly a contradiction in terms in the digital era. Here the computer screens are contemplated as discrete objects with quirky behaviors, never again repeated, making them surprisingly delightful revelations. The deceptively simple visual effects are the result of complex combinations of algorithmic phrases—words, symbols, equations—that translate figurative drawings into digital icons, some pictorial and others abstract forms. The real ghost in the machine is the programming code written by the artist to generate a series of indeterminate actions that are intrinsically meaningless until intercepted by a viewer. The resulting images are like seeds that grow only after they are fertilized by subjective perception.

Indeed, Simon often uses metaphors of biological flowering and growth to evoke spiritual processes. In *Tree*, 2007, a harmonious sacred Islamic floral motif in striking electric blue and red decorates the facade—intentionally or not forming the shape of a jet headed toward the ground—that narrows to reveal fluctuating computer images reflected from a concealed LCD screen via a system of mirrors creating panels on each side. Below these, in two little boxes, are depictions of a plant growing from seed to mature tree, symmetrically opposed to suggest the circularity of nature. Both *Tree* and *Visions*, on the opposite wall, are tabernacles for meditative contemplation; they use constantly mutating universal elements to transform the here and now into an eternal moment.

To inform his artistic practice, Simon produces what he calls "Divination Drawings," daily automatic compositions posted on the Internet. On April 1, 2009, a painting of three flowers is emphasized with the caption: "3 generations. There is joy to be found exploring endless variations in nature. More joy comes from seeing this infinite potential in what is closest to you." This could also be a manifesto for the New York–based artist's hypnotic reanimated machines, whose obsolescence mirrors our own ephemeral existence—more precious for its fleeting relevance and more profound than our mundane language can express.

—*Cathryn Drake*