

Hooked Into Machine

Chad Curtis creates elaborate line drawings without ever touching a pencil.

by Tom Tiballi

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[VISUAL ART]

A GOOD BIT OF MY GENERATION'S LIFE STORY IN THE EARLY '90s was written on an Etch A Sketch. Sure, finger-painting turkeys in art class could satisfy a certain urge to merge palms with globs of primary-colored acrylic paint. But to twist a pair of white plastic knobs this way and that and generate an elaborate, sometimes even identifiable by grownups, work of art? Though we didn't understand the mechanics behind the magic, Etch A Sketch blew our prepubescent minds.

Over the past 20 years, digital vs. analog has become a straight-up brawl among artists and tech nerds alike. But the debate is no longer relegated to how awesome your Tamagotchi is, or whether Jar-Jar Binks sucks (he does). Rather, it's woven itself into a much bigger question of the relationship between humans and our hyper-evolving digital culture. How much do we rely on technology to survive? Are our lives just a series of iPhone apps? Local artist Chad Curtis' latest installation, "Drawing Machine," explores this every notion, that the digital world has permeated even the simplest of tasks — namely, drawing.

"At first, I was suspicious of the digital," says Curtis on the phone last week while packing for an upcoming show at the Urban Institute of Contemporary Art in Grand Rapids, Mich. "But later, I began making mold-made [ceramic] work. Further along, a lot of it started to be designed on the computer, and I began to see that the intellectual process was really similar between creating analog and digital art."

In exploring this relationship, Curtis, an assistant professor at Temple's Tyler School of Art, has created a CNC (computer numerically controlled) drawing machine, which resides in Crane Arts' front hallway. Before you go Googling it, here's the gist: Think of a dot-matrix printer you might have known in a previous life. Redesign it so it can be hung on a wall to draw gigantic, elaborate images over multiple hours with a ballpoint pen. In this case, Curtis has adapted images from John James Audubon's iconic watercolor "Birds of America" series, perhaps further commenting on technology's role in the natural world.

Built with just a handful of components — wood, copper, a computer bit and a microcontroller — Curtis' machine draws every Wednesday from noon to 6 p.m., or by appointment, to complete its solitary task; visitors can watch the pre-planned, pre-programmed works of art slowly sketched onto 30-by-22-inch sheets of paper and make their own judgments as the line drawings unfold — it's not unlike watching an old Etch A Sketch masterpiece come to life.

"Fearing the new makes you dated, but at the same time people desire to preserve the analog," Curtis adds. "Really, the combination of the two is just a continual extension of possibilities."

(tom.tiballi@citypaper.net)



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CNC MUSING FACTORY: Inspired by the convergence of the natural and digital worlds, Chad Curtis built a sketching machine and programmed it to draw scenes from nature.

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Opening receptions Thu., Feb. and March 11, 6-9 p.m., free, through April 4, The Hall at Crane Arts Building, 1400 N. American St., 215-232-3203, inliquid.com.