FirstWorks' eighth annual "Pixilerations"

Balancing act: tech and art

By **GREG COOK** | September 27, 2011

© GREG COOK

TENUOUS CONNECTIONS Smith's *Digital Painting: Social Network*

Rebecca Mushtare's *StoryQuilt* invites you to sit at a faux sewing machine and tell it a story, which the Mount Kisco, New York, artist's software converts into a virtual quilt that is projected on the wall above. I leaned into the microphone and spoke about a 2-year-old boy upset by a scene in the movie *Ponyo*. As soon as I finished talking, it spit out a pattern of black-and-gray triangles in a variation of a flying geese quilt, inspired only by the "duration, volume, frequency" and other "measurable components" of my tale.

What does it mean to reduce our stories to simple measurements of their dimensions? This sort of sabermetrics approach to life is common among the 40 artists from around the globe exhibiting in "Pixilerations," the eighth annual festival of tech art organized by FirstWorks in Providence through October 2. (I'm focusing on exhibits, but there's also an okay pair of billboards in the parking lot at Page and Pine streets, and a concert of electronic music at Firehouse 13, 41 Central Street, Providence, on September 30.) *Moneyball* has demonstrated the

benefits of analyzing baseball performance data to discover what sports talents really help win games and discover a deeper, more accurate understanding of this human phenomenon. But artists' data mining often disconnects from the soul of the thing — in the case Mushtare's *StoryQuilt*, which is among the works on view at RISD's Sol Koffler Gallery (169 Weybosset Street,). Don't we lose something important if we don't pay any attention to the content of our stories?

Often the needs of tech in tech art get in the way of the art. Works are more moving when they're (apparently) simpler, allowing the content of the art to come to the fore. At Brown University's Granoff Center for the Creative Arts (154 Angell Street), Georgie Friedman of Boston describes her installation as video of a lightning storm projected across one wall of a Granoff room. It's mostly dark, the room filled with the sound of wind and thunder, then intermittent flashes of red and white light behind silhouetted trees. The work is pretty straightforward, but the presentation — particularly the sound — transforms the gray room into the outdoors.

Il Jeffuria Pizza, an interactive video installation by Jeffu Warmouth of Fitchburg, Massachusetts, offers a touch-screen menu of pizzas that prompt video of a life-sized Warmouth in a chef's hat to act out wacky orders. Order "Baseball Pizza" and he swings a rolling pin at balls of dough thrown his way; order "UFO Pizza" and a pie floats down (on very visible wires) for Warmouth to add pepperoni and cheese. It's lite comedy in the tradition of silent film comedians, William Wegman, and *Sesame Street*.

Chun-Chiang Niu of Taiwan projects images of papers flapping in wind atop three similar sheets of paper taped to the wall. The real papers don't move, but the video tricks your eyes into thinking they're waving. It's a simple move, but powerfully disorients your senses, confusing the virtual with the real.

I Love You, Be Safe by Ian Alan Paul of San Francisco is video headshots of performers giving overlapping, monotone readings of lines like "Baby, where are you," "You need an ID to get in," "Take care." Lines like "Pentagon hit" slowly clue you in that the words come from text messages sent on September 11, 2001. It's powerful material, but the voices become an irritating cacophony.

TEXTILE TALE Mushtare's *StoryQuilt*

Back at RISD, Clement Valla of Providence wittily plumbs the distortions of technology by turning Google Earth errors into funhouse mirror postcards of highways that drape over bridges and bridge spans that seem to come apart at the middle. Graham Smith's *Digital Painting: Social Network* includes an animated "digital painting" of a field and stream at night buzzing with the glowing circles of lightning bugs, which are meant to represent his Facebook friends. As an image and metaphor, it's simplistic. But what's fascinating is a group of shelves next to it, labeled with the names of these friends, and each holding something they gave him when he sought them out in person. An ex-girlfriend offered a work nametag; his longtime best friend, a hair rubber band; that friend's sister, a charm bracelet; a "girl from college dorm," a rock. Mostly it's junk, but these tokens begin to speak of our relationships — virtual and in the flesh — of how they ebb and flow, of the sometimes tenuous strands that connect us to one another.

Friedman's *Light of the Storm*