

Future's so bright: Revolutionary new media art shines at BMoCA's 'MediaLive: Technology as Healing' exhibit



A guest takes a look around the "MediaLive: Technology as Healing" exhibit that is on display at BMoCA through Jan. 14. "MediaLive" explores the synergies between art and technology as instruments of positive change for the future. (BMoCA/Courtesy photo)



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Imagine having the ability to slap on a headset, conjure up some materials out of thin air, and create an intricate 3D chromatic sculpture that will float in the sky above Yellowstone National Park for the rest of eternity – all without ever disturbing the peacefully grazing bison nearby.



A museum guest interacts with Cherish Marquez's immersive video game, which explores the impact of plant life on communities that live in the arid desert landscape of Sierra Blanca, Texas. (BMoCA/Courtesy photo)

While that might sound like the premise to an H.G. Wells novel to some, or complete and utter witchcraft to others, that's just another Tuesday for artist Matthew Rey Treece.

Treece, known professionally as "Eecertrey", is a visual artist based out of Colorado who uses the latest cutting-edge technology to create those aforementioned sculptures and suspend them in the outdoors using virtual and augmented reality.

If that sounds complicated, bear with me: Treece is one of the new media artists featured in the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art's current exhibition, "MediaLive: Technology as Healing," which is on display through Jan. 14.

The exhibition, tailored by Kiah Butcher, BMoCA's associate curator of community engagement, delves into the intricate relationship between art and technology as catalysts for positive societal change, showcasing the work of eight new media artists who use technology as a means to dig deeper into the world around them.

For the digitally dense, new media art refers to a broad category of modern artworks that use and interact with cutting-edge technologies, including virtual reality, computer-generated animation and online platforms.

“I really wanted to give people the opportunity to explore what the heck new media even is,” Butcher said. ” It’s a really large, super-broad genre of art, almost to the point where it’s a little unfair because it encompasses so many things. I felt really strongly about bringing new media into the community because it is always on the forefront of contemporary art, and it is maybe not a medium that people have experienced before. There’s so much negative connotation associated with technology – for instance, the dangerous side of social media, or the impacts of fast fashion.”

Or AI taking over creative writing jobs.

According to Butcher, “MediaLive” was an opportunity to flip that narrative and highlight all of the positive ways that technology has informed not only art, but humanity as well – hence the theme, “Technology as Healing.”



In this installation, artist Raquel Meyers collaborated with Denver Digerati to use obsolete technology, like CRT televisions and Commodore 64 computers, to create animations that celebrate early digital art and challenge the narrative that “new equals better.” (BMoCA/Courtesy photo)

Throughout the exhibition, visitors are encouraged to explore and interact with the works on display in the space to further familiarize themselves with the relationship between technology and empathy.

In one area of the space, artist Cherish Marquez's immersive video game — inspired by desert flora, intertwining nature, culture and personal stories — invites guests to play along as a jackrabbit navigating the desert that reflects Marquez's childhood memories of Sierra Blanca, Texas.

In another section, CU Assistant Professor Mirela Alistar's "Microbial Dwelling" creates a meditative space made from kombucha leather, a sustainable biomaterial, challenging the viewer's relationship with technology and nature while promoting sustainable coexistence.



Ále Campos presents "Con Esos Ojos / With Those Eyes (2022)," a two-channel video installation combining technology, drag performance and El Salvadorian queer identity. Campos uses drag as a means for spiritual and psychological healing, exploring themes of femininity, machismo, religion and culture. (BMoCA/Courtesy photo)

Among the buzz and the stimulus of the exhibition, creative technologist, musician and engineer Sophia Mehdizadeh wanted to create a moment for viewers to reflect inwardly.

Mehdizadeh, who is a doctoral student in the Brain Music Lab at CU Boulder's ATLAS Institute, is currently researching musical performance systems that incorporate neuroscience and cognitive science concepts. She is exploring how human physiological signals (such as heartbeats, skin conductance, breathing patterns and brain waves) can be used as expressive control signals for creating sound.

"I think that it can be difficult, at times, to perceive and pay attention to our own heartbeats or other signals that our body is giving us," Mehdizadeh said. "Personally, I definitely find interception and having this awareness quite challenging. Research has shown that this awareness is linked to a lot of benefits for emotion processing and emotion regulation."

Mehdizadeh's piece employs the use of an instrument called "idiophones" — essentially, a chime. Unlike instruments that need strings, air, or skins to make sound, idiophones make sound by themselves when they're hit or shaken. Mehdi-zadeh uses chimes in her art to show how things resonate, or connect.

"This can mean the actual sound they make, but also how we connect with ourselves and others," she said. "Think of each chime as something that makes sound by itself, but also think of people as making their own kind of sound or rhythm, like how our heartbeat shows what we're feeling or how we're doing."

Mehdizadeh's installation consists of recordings of her and a loved one's heartbeat.

"The chimes are set up to be played by little motors that copy these heart rhythms," Mehdi-zadeh said. "This is like showing a special moment where two people are connected and their heartbeats are in sync. I hope that by experiencing that, perhaps visitors will feel more aware of their own body's signals and what those can communicate."



Sophia Mehdi-zadeh, with support from the Brain Music Lab, presents a site-specific sonic sculpture exploring three types of resonance: interpersonal, intrapersonal and musical. (BMoCA/Courtesy photo)

Where Mehdi-zadeh hopes to pull audiences inward, Matthew Rey Treece hopes to bring viewers outside of themselves — outside of this world, even.

Treece, who cut his teeth as a photographer, urban explorer and virtual graffiti artist in Ohio, suffered a life-changing injury that would go on to influence his art.

“Right before I moved to Colorado, I broke my back snowboarding in Cincinnati,” Treece said. “I had a full spinal fusion and was told that I might not walk again. Luckily, that wasn’t the case, and as soon as I moved to Colorado, I began to heal myself both physically and mentally using art and technology.”

Treece took advantage of various technology tools that allowed him to “export” his imagination.

“I could be outdoors, and use tools like the camera to take landscape pictures,” Treece said. “It allowed me to do and share my creativity by using this technology within nature. Then it morphed into using this augmented reality headset and taking that out into nature. So not only am I going out on a hike, I’m taking a camera, a tripod, an AR or VR headset with me and my cellphone.”

Treece essentially uses the technology to create — in a VR or AR space — sculptures and pieces of art that are pulled directly from his mind into the universe.

How, you ask? Once again, for the digitally dense: Augmented reality (AR) enhances one’s immediate environment by overlaying digital components onto their current view, typically through a smartphone’s camera — or in Treece’s case, through AR glasses. Conversely, virtual reality (VR) offers a fully immersive experience, substituting the real-world setting with a simulated one.

Using these technologies, artists can create digital sculptures or objects using specialized 3D modeling software. These objects are designed in a virtual space and can be as realistic or abstract as the artist desires, and can then be “placed” in the real world. For example, an artist could create a virtual sculpture and place it in a park, where it would be visible through a smartphone or AR glasses.

“A lot of people in the photography and nature space are very apprehensive of the impact that technology has had (on nature),” Treece said, noting that many nature advocates complain about packed trails, busy national parks and how online booking has ruined the experience. Or how bison are headbutting tourists who get too close for selfies. “I found a really interesting way to use it to my advantage.”

As a part of Treece's installation, guests will have the opportunity to put on an AR headset, take a peek around the gallery, and see what magical creations unfurl right in front of their own eyes.

"I hope that people walk into this exhibition with an open mind and an open heart," Butcher said. "When people leave, I hope that they'll have experienced some empathy, I hope they'll have experienced a pop of positivity in their life, I hope they'll have had some fun and I hope that they'll have had some of their ideas about what art is, challenged."

"MediaLive: Technology as Healing" is on display at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, 1750 13th St., Boulder, through Jan. 14. For more information, visit bmoca.org.



Artist Eceetrey exports his imagination into VR/AR sculptures purposefully placed in outdoor environments. His work that is on display at "MediaLive" features photographs, sculptures and an interactive augmented reality experience. (BMoCA/Courtesy photo)
