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WINTER / SPRING

GALLERY GUIDE

# STEINA: 1970–2000



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## STEINA

(NÉE STEINUNN BRIEM  
BJARNADOTTIR)

BORN IN 1940 IN  
REYKJAVIK, ICELAND

LIVES AND WORKS IN  
SANTA FE,  
NEW MEXICO

Composer, performer, engineer, and artist, Steina created a body of work over the past three decades that expanded the boundaries of video technology, electronic imaging, and new media art in unprecedented ways. Steina was initially trained during the 1950s and '60s as a classical violinist with a background in music theory in Iceland and Prague. She came to visual art from experimental music and engineering – two different worlds that began to merge with video and installation art in this country, particularly in New York, during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Steina's prolific career includes live performances, opto-mechanical kinetic sculptures, single-channel videos, and multi-channel installation "environments" – a sampling of which are included in this exhibition. This broad range reflects Steina's immense curiosity, creativity, and resistance to art historians' and critics' fondness for categorizing art by style, type, or movement. Despite her aversion to the often cryptic rhetoric that accompanies the theorizing of art, Steina's work embodies the diversity, technological experimentation, spatial innovation, and interactivity that have become hallmarks of new media art today.

*Allvision* (1976) ushers us into Steina's thirty-year survey and exemplifies her playfully experimental approach toward art and technology, her love for building machines, and her desire to challenge how we see the world around us – aspects that characterize much of her work from the 1970s. *Allvision* is a kinetic sculpture comprised of a mirrored garden sphere, two video cameras attached to either end of a rotating armature, and television monitors. As the cameras orbit the sphere, the nearby monitors display what the cameras see in real time. By inserting the sphere between the two monitors, Steina allows us to see the space in its entirety. She situates us in an undefined area that lies somewhere between physical and electronic space (we see ourselves reflected in the sphere, as well as on the monitors). In effect, we become both the objects of the machine's vision and observers of its actions.

The blurring of boundaries in *Allvision* reoccurs in Steina's single-channel works from the 1970s on display in the viewing room located at the back of the first gallery. In videos such as *Distant Activities* (1972), *Land of Timoteus* (1975), and *Flux* (1977), for example, Steina uses home-made image-altering devices such as switchers and time-delays to distort images of landscapes, people, and objects.

Steina integrates sound in all of her work. Like a sculptor who molds clay into forms, Steina takes sound, particularly electronic sound, and shapes it into a variety of structures. The two versions of *Violin Power* (1978) on display reflect Steina's ongoing investigation into the relationship between music and the electronic image. In the original black-and-white video, we see Steina before the camera as both a performer and composer, revealing the power of the violin as an image-generating tool. As she draws her bow across the strings of her electronically wired violin, the sounds produced alter the image: new patterns and sinewy lines interrupt the raster lines (an artifact of the electron beam in the monitor's cathode ray tube) distorting the picture. Steina's early experiments with technology anticipate the computer-designed performance software that she would help develop and later use in works such as *Violin Power: Rome Performance* (2004).

Steina and Woody Vasulka (her husband and some-time collaborator) left New York for Santa Fe in 1980. The move was a catalyst for Steina; although her work retains its experimental feel, the videos that she produced during this period reflect a consideration of place that became central to her work. *The West* (1983) is emblematic of this shift in Steina's practice. In this two-channel multi-screen installation, iconic images of the Southwest, from the Anasazi ruins to the Very Large Array, span twenty-one monitors. Accompanied by Woody Vasulka's enigmatic soundtrack, a series of vibrant, highly saturated images drift across the screens. In effect, Steina creates a technological environment

that allows viewers to experience the grandeur and spirituality that characterize the American Southwest.

Steina's single-channel videos from the 1980s onward reflect her response to the advancements in audio and video technology. In works such as *Cantaloup* (1980), *Summer Salt* (1982), *Lilith* (1987), and *Trevor* (1999-2000), color video dominates; multiple split screens appear, and the overlaying, fragmenting, and wrapping of repeated images occur through the digital, rather than analog, processing of images.

As you move from *The West* into the large-scale multi-channel projection environments of *Tokyo Four* (1991), *Borealis* (1992), *Pyroglyphs* (1995), and *Mynd* (2000), you experience the same sense of spatial disorientation that first occurs with *Allvision*. Now liberated from the confines of the television monitor, these large, lush projected images form sculpted environments where you experience the rituals of Japanese culture; the churning waters of Iceland; the dematerialization of molten steel; and the ominous skies, craggy coastlines, and ice floes of Iceland. The accompanying sound in each of these works, which ranges from the natural to the highly manipulated sounds of hammered metal, heightens the sense of displacement. In her technologically-based environments, Steina forges new relationships between sound, space, and image, allowing us to actively experience previously overlooked or unknown worlds.

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