

ENTERTAINMENT

Editor: Susan Scott

Artist joins plants and mechanics Show is natural mix

It's the first work of art this dealer has had to water everyday. Two large wall mounted discs growing grasses need spritzing to keep them alive.

The mechanical parts are activated by a motion detector. They start to move and whirl when anyone comes within range. And if you aren't alert, you are likely to be poked or nudged gently in the leg. If you stop moving, they stop moving too, and wait.

But though it seems they've escaped the pool at centre gallery, the seven, big, glowing, opening-and-closing lotus blossoms are not carnivores. They just consistently remind us it's their space.

This habitat, *Somewhere I Have Never Traveled* (1988), is Tim Watkins's vision of the future. It is a fantasy flooded in blue lights that reflects on the lotus flowers salmon-gold centre's (tingeing them with lavender) and on their wire mesh petals, which rise and fall with the slow rhythms of breathing.

"I think we've lost our appreciation of nature. I think our technology has run amok and is running amok over nature" says the Calgary-born, New York based artist.

"I see these flowers as trying to work back to nature in a positive sense and using technology in a constructive way to show the beauty of nature." Watkins's makes nature marvelous by imitating its forms.

Islands of intense light in the blue room, the flowers are linked to the water filled pool. As intense in a different way are the four, dark and tactile discs on wall; two growing grass and two others that are mounds of baron peat moss. Like uprooted and upended hills, the discs bring nature, death and decay to an artificial indoor landscape.

There is more than a little irony in the fact that the discs put nature in the place usually occupied by art, the gallery wall, in that the flowers are mechanical. As well, the pool in which three blue glass bulbs float like fragile planets, or like pawnshop balls, is a satellite dish.

In essence the piece effects a reversal and assimilation, beaming its implications at modern life in the global village.

Somewhere I Have Never Traveled takes its title from a poem by E.E. Cummings. It grew out of the installation *Thin Ice* (1988), which Watkins was commissioned to do for the New Gallery's Olympic Art Festival show. That piece was more pointed politically and more whimsical in its slightly Buck Rodgers, movie-set atmosphere.

Somewhere is a stronger and more evocative work. It functions less like a set than an alternate world. "This one really started to hone in on the metaphorical things I wanted to talk about" says Watkins.



Lotus Blossom: Tim Waktins's glowing flower has moving parts.

Much of the works success comes from the economical ways Watkins uses materials to make things and to make metaphors. Color and light are fused here. Most of the color comes from light passing through colored filters, like the blue gels on the gallery windows or from reflected light. The bases of the lotus flowers are Chinese woks; their centers clusters of plexi glass rods that conduct colors cast by orange plastic disc light by ordinary light bulbs. The aluminum of the lightweight petals is used on satellite dishes. The petal movements are operated by the metal pistols of the blossoms.

Form and materials mesh with content here as well. "I'm always trying to work with our relationships to nature and technology and to combine the two." Because I believe that for our survival, we have to work the two together."