

Sara Hughes

b.1971

Master of Fine Arts: Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

Sara Hughes calls herself a painter, but not in the traditional sense of the word as her ‘paintings’ can be found on all sorts of surfaces, from walls and floors, to plastic containers and paper cut-outs. Her tools range from paint brushes to computer programmes, juxtaposing the ‘subjective’ hand of the artist with the ‘objective’ mark of the machine. She often uses the same material as sign writers – machine-cut vinyl – but adds layers of painting and printing over the top, covering walls with a dazzling array of colourful patterns.

This kind of work is known as site-specific, and only survives for the duration of an exhibition. When it is time to de-install, the vinyl gets scraped off the walls, and the artwork no longer exists.

In *Data Attraction 2*, Hughes has screen-printed hard-edged geometric shapes, a barrage of concentric lozenges, and wonky targets to depict the data saturation of our daily lives. Shimmering patterns and acidic colours reference Op (short for optical) Art, the 1960s term for art that made your eyeballs dance. Hughes also nods to '60s psychedelia, which saw an explosion of colour in popular culture. Inspired by a fusion of anti-war politics, psychoactive drugs, and eastern philosophies; psychedelic art was found on record covers, murals and clothing throughout the hippie era. In an attempt to simulate the drug experience in art, psychedelia used searingly bright colours, busy patterns and warped perspectives.

But although Hughes’ work is trippy, it’s not very hippie. Her shapes are straight and sharp, while the strips of blue dots that zoom in and out of the picture plane are more likely to refer to early computers’ hole-punched paper strips, than pills or acid tabs. For Hughes, computers aren’t just tools for making art – they can also be its subject matter. As her title might suggest, she is ‘attracted’ to data – to the abstract codes and processes running behind the screens, in microchips and databanks.

Hughes’ interest in computers evolved from her earlier paintings and installations in which she utilised fabric designs: exploring their histories, cultural references, trade routes and migration patterns. She enjoyed the precision and repetition of Chinese brocades and Indian paisley designs, and she

became intrigued by the processes of their production on industrial weaving looms. Fabric factories mushroomed during the Industrial Revolution, which ushered in our modern era over 200 years ago. Some historians believe these industrial looms were the precursors to early computers because they used the same system of cards punched with holes to operate.

The connection between a loom weaving patterned fabric and a computer printing out data is part of what Hughes wants us to think about when we look at her weird and warped cyberscape. Hughes portrays what might be happening inside our computers as they process information – literally getting inside the mind of the machine. In this world, the usual laws of perspective, weight and colour no longer apply; it is an alternate reality to the one we occupy.

Tessa Laird

Artist website:

www.sarahughes.co.nz

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.gowlangsfordgallery.co.nz

Books:

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Hutchison, A. (2007). *Sara Hughes: Flower House*, Palmerston North, Te Manawa Museums Trust.

Paton, J. & et al. (2004). *Sara Hughes, Software For Ada, Love Me Tender*, Digital Mosaics, Dunedin, Hocken Library, University of Otago.

Web search:

Bridget Riley

