



Jessica Bronson/MATRIX 194 heaps, layers, and curls

September 16–November 11, 2001

**University of California
Berkeley Art Museum**

Jessica Bronson/MATRIX 194

“If I build a desire for transcendence into the very subject of the piece, it inevitably becomes humorous, and that is where the strength is. That is why my subjects are sometimes kind of silly. I find that whenever I am having what I think of as a ‘transcendent’ experience, it is often associated with the most banal activities.”

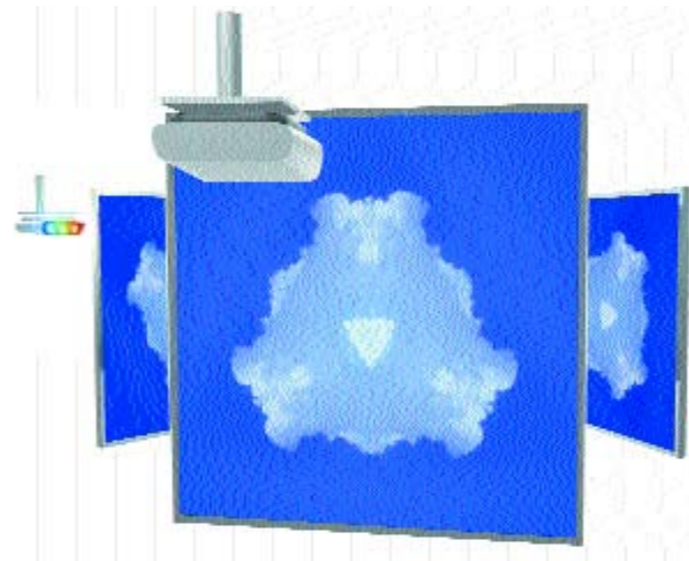
—Jessica Bronson¹

The experience of time in nature is a recurrent theme in the work of Los Angeles-based artist Jessica Bronson. The transitory flashes of a cosmic light show, the near stasis of the lunar landscape, the unending flux of a hurricane, and the slow passage of clouds are all elements that have appeared in her video installations, monitor works, and single-channel videotapes.

Fascinated by the genres, history, and construction of film, Bronson works with appropriated footage, as well as film and video images that she shoots on location. Her interest is in the viewer’s relationship to the “time” and “timelessness” in time-based media as well as in the everyday. In this way, the non-narrative aspect of her work is informed by structuralist film, just as the soundtracks are influenced by ambient music. Bronson describes the latter-day poetics of video’s effects as “dynamic distraction,” and her video installations confront and overwhelm the viewer in myriad ways. The result is hypnotic reverie—what we might call “zoning out.”² Bronson’s work can be located within a type of Southern California media art that grows out of and stresses an awareness of film and television and also includes Doug Aitken, Diana Thater, and TJ Wilcox.

heaps, layers, and curls, Bronson’s site-specific MATRIX installation, is a three-screen, mural-scale video projection that continues the artist’s exploration of many of her interests which will be described below—in landscape painting, photography, structuralist cinema, special effects, sound art, and science fiction. Using cloud formations as its visual subject, the video addresses the implications of man-made alterations upon nature, from changing weather patterns to genetic engineering: the clouds are digitally altered so that they move and change in unnatural ways. As in Bronson’s past installations, the soundtrack provides narrative overtones to an otherwise non-narrative work; here, the sound consists of voice transmissions from in-flight recorders and excerpts of 19th century music.

Before the 19th century, most weather observers believed that clouds were too transient and changeable to be classified or analyzed. Cloud types were never named; rather, they were described according to color and form by each observer. Then, within a year, two cloud classification schemes were independently developed by French naturalist Jean Baptiste Lamarck and English philosopher Luke Howard. In December of 1802, Howard presented a paper titled “On the Modification [Classification] of Clouds,” in which he proposed that one could identify several sim-



ple categories within the complexity of cloud forms: Cumulus (heap): convex or conical heaps, increasing upward from a horizontal base; Stratus (layer): widely extended horizontal sheet; Cirrus (curl): flexuous fibers extensible by increase in any or all directions; and Nimbus (rain): systems of clouds from which rain falls. With only minor adjustments in nomenclature, these names and categories are still employed internationally by meteorologists 200 years later.³

Artists had been using clouds as archetypes of nature’s indefiniteness for centuries before Howard developed his classification system. The 17th century Dutch painter Jacob von Ruisdael, for instance, used trees as models for clouds and even developed his own unique model: the cannon blast.⁴ But Howard’s work appears to have influenced many 19th century Romantic painters, including John Constable, Joseph M.W. Turner, and Caspar David Friedrich, who used his descriptions to depict clouds with greater detail and accuracy.⁵ In fact, Constable created 50 studies of Cirrus clouds between 1820 and 1821. And clouds, serving poetic and metaphoric value, became the subjects of photography at the end of the 19th century. Alfred Steiglitz, the most well-known photographer of clouds, has been quoted as saying, “my philosophy of life is captured in my photographs of clouds.”⁶ Bronson’s choice of clouds as subject matter continues her fascination with, and exploration of, natural, supernatural, and hyper-natural phenomena.

Artists have been reacting to the extraordinary topography and light of California since they joined exploratory expeditions in the early 19th century. The establishment of the European tradition of outdoor easel painting in California began in the 1850s during the Gold Rush era. One of the principal artistic stylistic movements of the second half of the 19th century, Romantic Realism, was characterized by the work of California painters like Alfred Bierstadt, who transformed the precisely detailed, idealized landscapes of the Hudson River School into a looser, more naturalistic style. In the last decade of the 19th century, Impressionism reached California. William Keith, along with other artists, moved California landscape painting toward an evocation of mood.⁷ And the environment of Southern California specifically influenced 20th century light and space artists such as Robert Irwin and James Turrell.

In some regards, Bronson’s video installations can be seen as landscape paintings in motion. Her view of nature, though, is a deconstructed one informed by theory as well as by cinema. Speaking about the relationship between structuralist

heaps, layers, and curls, 2001 [installation plan]; digital image; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Goldman Tevis, Los Angeles.



film and her own work, Bronson has explained, “My experience of a lot of early structuralist films is one of entering into some kind of phenomenological space similar to a state of reverie. I could understand intellectually and appreciate what it was the structuralists were trying to do, but at the same time I would have these incredibly powerful experiences, and so I wanted to somehow conflate those two things in my own work.”⁸ Historically, the development of structuralist film corresponds to the rise of Minimalism. The structuralist film is based on easily intuited and described organizing structures. The aesthetics are quite traditional and grounded in the notion that a work of art should strike a balance between diversity and unity. The simple structures of the films serve as unifying forms that support a variety of cognitive and perceptual applications for the spectator.⁹

Bronson’s images, surprising and verging on the psychedelic, are inspired by the development of, and advances in, cinematic special effects. At the beginning of the 20th century, the biggest special effect of all was cinema itself. People paid to see workers leaving a factory, a baby being fed, a train arriving at a station. The early pioneers of special effects created illusions that relied on cinema’s ability to make discontinuous motion appear continuous and make objects appear extremely big or small by exploiting perspective. Today, common illusions include blue-screen, split-screen, and digital compositing, as well as pervasive computer animation.¹⁰ In contrast to the illusions of Hollywood, Bronson’s manipulations are highly apparent.

Bronson’s jarring video installation *world picture*, shown at MoCA Los Angeles in 1998, re-creates a high-speed chase and crash along Los Angeles’s intricate freeway system. The imagery is culled from found tape as well as helicopter footage shot by the artist. On two large, arresting, curved screens, Bronson juxtaposes two projected mirror images. The footage moves between that shot from a helicopter looking down and random close-ups of moving cars. What becomes important in *world picture*, as in so many of Bronson’s works, is not so much the drama of the spectacle as those moments in between, the moments of disruption.¹¹ The pregnant pauses, blank screens inserted among the images, allow viewers a chance to process the experiences to which the artist exposes them.

First and Last Strike, shown as part of *circumfluentsuperfield*, an exhibition at CRG Gallery in New York in 1998, is a mesmerizing video of digitally-altered lightning imagery played on a white, wall-mounted monitor. To a pulsing soundtrack of elec-

doubled sunset, 2000-2001; DVDs, DVD players, LCD projectors, extend control, speakers, projection screens, and cables; dimensions variable. Photo courtesy CRG Gallery, New York.



tronic music, the night sky becomes a cosmic blackboard for flashing filaments of light.¹² Unlike video artists such as Peter Campus, Bill Viola, and Gary Hill, Bronson is not interested in a contemplative immersion in the phenomena of nature. Instead, she emphasizes nature’s “otherness” in a way that feeds into the contemporary fascination with sci-fi paranoia: she peppers nature with hints of alien abduction, superhuman surveillance, and millennial disasters. The glowing discs, orchestrated flashes of lightning, and eerie electronic music of *circumfluentsuperfield* recall fifties sci-fi films and their contemporary manifestation in television shows like *The X-Files*,¹³ as well as the everyday mediated reality of prime-time television news.

One of Bronson’s current preoccupations is global positioning satellite technology. The Global Positioning System (GPS) is a constellation of satellites originally deployed to aid U.S. armed forces in position location; it is capable of providing accuracy to within a few meters.¹⁴ Bronson finds a pervasive component of contemporary society to be a failure to know where we are (psychically, spiritually) despite sophisticated technology that can pinpoint our exact location.

In *heaps, layers, and curls*, Bronson chooses to morph clouds, elements of nature that can be identified yet not really recognized, since they are in constant flux and motion. Unlike genetic mutations, which can occur at a fairly microscopic level yet exert an exponential effect, Bronson’s cloud mutations are so obvious and exaggerated that they are both humorous and harmless. As such, she questions how absurd the intervention of science into nature needs to be before anyone will notice.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

¹ “A conversation between Jessica Bronson and Jan Tumi, September 1998,” in *Jessica Bronson*, Cornelia H. Butler, editor (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), n/p. ² Claudine Ise, “Cutting to [and Cutting Up] the Chase in ‘World Picture,’” *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 1999, p. F36. ³ Luke Howard: The Man Who Named the Clouds,” *Spectrum Educational Enterprises*, 1999, www.islandnet.com [see weather/history]. ⁴ As is explained in a 1991 video entitled “A History of Clouds” by Los Angeles video artists Bruce and Norman Yonemoto. ⁵ *Spectrum Educational Enterprises*. ⁶ Yonemoto video. ⁷ This paragraph is informed by descriptive texts for two exhibitions at the Oakland Museum of California: *All Things Bright & Beautiful: California Impressionist Painting* (March 20–May 30, 1999) and *A Legacy of Early California Paintings: The Shumate Collection* (May 26–August 5, 2001). ⁸ Butler, n/p. ⁹ Noel Carroll, “Diversity and Unity,” *Soho Weekly News*, December 29, 1977, n/p. ¹⁰ “The Grand Illusion: A Century of Special Effects,” www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova. ¹¹ Julie Joyce, “Static Supreme,” *Art/Text*, 1999, no. 65, p. 45. ¹² Eleanor Heartney, “Jessica Bronson at CRG,” *Art in America*, March 1999, p. 112. ¹³ *ibid.* ¹⁴ “A Policy Direction for the Global Positioning System: Balancing National Security and Commercial Interests,” www.rand.org/publications.

panamint tilt, 2000; laser disc, laser disc player, video projectors, and cables; dimensions variable. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen.



From September 12 to October 13, 2001, New Langton Arts in San Francisco presents the first complete installation of Jessica Bronson's Selections from *Video Art for the Bar Series*. Created to be shown as part of an unrealized exhibition in Paris in 1997, the three videos in this series (*Jessica Bronson and Dick Slessig Present For Your Pleasure...* [1996], *GO-GODDARD* [1997], and *Approach... a shot to the green* [1998]) respond to the genre of "bar video," with its sub-categories of music, dance, and sports video.

The following are excerpts from a phone conversation between Jessica Bronson and New Langton Arts Program Director James Bewley on July 19, 2001.

BEWLEY: Apart from the bar theme, can you tell me what, if any, overriding themes are present in these three works?

BRONSON: This body of work was produced around the time I began teaching an introductory video art history class. It sounds strange, but the class put me in a funny position, because I was required to teach a topic that I hadn't been particularly interested in: early video art practice. As I reviewed the material, I became fascinated with shared aspects of early video practice such as duration and narcissism. I began with the music video, because I had a collection of live recordings of Dick Slessig playing covers of covers at Bruno's from 1996 and 1997. They had this great 30-minute version of Lou Donaldson's *One Cylinder* that eloquently dealt with some of the same issues as early video...duration, repetition, real time, appropriation. So I used the song as a soundtrack for the imagery, which is an endlessly repeating opening title sequence over lava lamp footage. The perpetual self-referencing titles became my way of addressing art historian Rosalind Krauss's seminal ideas of self-reflexivity in video art.

BEWLEY: Locating the work in an early seventies practice is interesting because I noticed that you also seem to use effects that are dramatically out of date by today's standards—for example, the mosaic effect in *Jessica Bronson and the Dick Slessig Combo present for your pleasure...*

BRONSON: My interest in effects is an ongoing one and has to do with exploring notions of the effect in popular culture and its inevitable exhaustion to affect us. The use of the mosaic effect in *pleasure* gave me the opportunity to reference its use as a device for obscuring identity in early nineties real time television such as *Cops*. Plus, I'm very interested in the aesthetics of effects, so by slowly dissolving the

heaps, layers, and curls, 2001 (installation plan); digital image; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Goldman Tevis, Los Angeles.

mosaic version of the lava lamp into itself, I was also hoping to allude to that.

BEWLEY: The use of effects also makes me think of the references to high and low culture in this body of work. How does this come into play, for example, in *GO-GODDARD*?

BRONSON: *GO-GODDARD*, the dance video, was intended to produce a rupture of genre by cross-cutting between two seemingly different movies...a sixties B- movie, *Village of the Giants*, in which a bunch of teens terrorize a California town with rampant dance parties; and Godard's *Contempt*, which deals with the retelling of the retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*. These movies were intended to appeal to different audiences; however, I think they both deal with epic ideas of man, nature and existence.

BEWLEY: For the sports video, you tackle the extreme sport of golf...

BRONSON: Golf is an extreme sport. It's extremely strange and extremely slow. In *Approach... a shot to the green*, instead of the usual slow paced shots of the fairway, I used some of the same camera techniques of skateboarding or downhill skiing coverage. The use of hand-held tracking shots and low angle perspectives conveys some sense of impending excitement. At the points between the green and the tee, I inserted excerpts from a golf landscaping text book because of its quasi-poetic quality.

BEWLEY: Your original intention was that the installation of this series would be seamlessly integrated into a bar setting, using white monitors and wall mounts. At Langton, you're projecting the work on three 3' x 4' screens. How does the size affect work created for such a specific setting?

BRONSON: I'm very intrigued by the exhibition history at Langton, especially the commitment to alternative—can one still say that word?—art practices. I wanted these pieces to float between different formats. By that, I mean video installation, single channel, sculpture, performance, and sound piece. In this way, the installation of the piece becomes very site-specific, in that I am hoping viewers' experiences with Langton's program will enable them to more readily think of these different possibilities.

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doubled sunset, 2000-2001; DVDs, DVD players, LCD projectors, extend control, speakers, projection screens, and cables; dimensions variable. Photo courtesy CRG Gallery, New York.

Jessica Bronson was born on Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota in 1963. She studied biomedical engineering at Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana, and received her Bachelor of Science from the University of New Mexico in 1987. She then attended Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, where she received her Master of Fine Arts in 1994. Bronson lives and works in Los Angeles.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2001 "Selections from the *Video Art for the Bar Series*," New Langton Arts, San Francisco, CA
- CRG Gallery, New York, NY
- "panamint tilt," ArtPace, San Antonio, TX
- 2000 "Recent Projects," Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand
- "a small infinite [northwest quadrant]," Goldman Tevis, Los Angeles, CA
- "panamint tilt," Charles Luckman Fine Art Gallery, Cal State University, Los Angeles, CA
- "s u p e r f l u e n t c i r c u m f i e l d," Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO
- 1998 "world picture," Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA
- "c i r c u m f l u e n t s u p e r f i e l d," CRG Gallery, New York, NY
- 1997 "its seethe, the quietest of whispers," Institute of Visual Arts, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI and Bliss, Pasadena, CA
- 1996 "Red Line," Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2001 "tracking," California College of Arts and Crafts, San Francisco, CA
- 2000 "Made in California 1900-2000," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
- "Speed of Vision," The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT and Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Pittsburgh, PA
- "L.A. Ex," Villa Stuck, Munich, Germany
- "[extra] super [meta]," Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA
- "Shifting Ground: Transformed Views of the American Landscape," Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA
- "Let's Entertain," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; Portland Art Museum, Portland, OR; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France; Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Wolfsburg, Germany; and Miami Art Museum, Miami, FL

panamint tilt, 2000; laser disc, laser disc player, video projectors, and cables; dimensions variable. Photo by Fredrik Nilssen.

- 1999 "Hotel Utopia," organized by Constanze Ruhm, various locations, Vienna, Austria
- "The L.A. Edge Festival," Geffen Contemporary Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA and Park Plaza Hotel, Los Angeles, CA

- "The Living Theatre," Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg, Austria
- "Landscape: Outside the Frame," MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA
- "Sound Foundations: The Audio Bases of Video Art," Bard College, Annandale on the Hudson, NY

- 1998 "Light x Eight: The Hanukkah Project," The Jewish Museum, New York, NY
- "Zone Franche: Global Tekno," La Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris, France
- "Dromology: Ecstasies of Speed," New Langton Arts, San Francisco, CA
- "Seamless," Stichting De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- "SPAN: Jessica Bronson, Mariko Mori, Diana Thater," ARTSPACE, Auckland, New Zealand

- 1997 "A Home Show: Sitting Up Erect or Reclining," Nostitzstrasse 14, Berlin, Germany
- "Objectif Lune," Centre d'art Neuchatel, Neuchatel, Switzerland
- "Sunshine and Noir: Art from L.A. 1960-1997," Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark and Armand Hammer Museum of Art at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA
- "Orange County Museum of Art Biennial," Newport Beach, CA

- 1996 "Junge Szene '96," Wiener Secession, Vienna, Austria
- "New York Film and Video Festival," Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center, New York, NY
- "Wunderbar," Kunstverein Hamburg, Germany
- 1995 "Sampler II," David Zwirner Gallery, New York and Rotterdam Film Festival, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Selected Catalogues and Publications

- panamint tilt*, Charles Luckman Fine Art Gallery, Cal State University, Los Angeles, CA, 2001.
- Fresh Cream*, Phaidon Press Limited, London, U.K., 2000.
- Let's Entertain*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, 2000.
- Made in California 1900-2000*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, 2000.
- s u p e r f l u e n t c i r c u m f i e l d*, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO, 2000.
- world picture*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA, 1998.
- SPAN: Jessica Bronson, Mariko Mori, Diana Thater*, ARTSPACE, Auckland, New Zealand, 1998.
- Sunshine and Noir: Art from L.A. 1960-1997*, Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1997.

GO-GODDARD, 1998 (detail); video still. Photo courtesy of the artist.

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Work in MATRIX

Jessica Bronson
heaps, layers, and curls, 2001
Mixed media
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Goldman Tevis, Los Angeles
Edition 1 of 3

Please Note:

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson will give a curator's walkthrough of this exhibition and Ceal Floyer/MATRIX 192 37' 4" on Thursday, October 25, 2001, at 12:15 p.m.

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Jessica Bronson and the Dick Slessig Combo present for your pleasure..., 1996 (detail); video still. Photo courtesy of the artist.