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HEALTHCARE DESIGN

SHOWCASE

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Digital animation comes to health care

BY RICHARD L. PECK, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

It is no overstatement to say that digital animation has transformed the movie-going experience. The recently released *Avatar* is breaking new ground in this direction, but scarcely a year goes by without at least three or four blockbusters showing, aimed primarily at children but delighting grown-ups as well. Now longtime mural and multimedia artist Catherine Mayer is introducing the techniques to the healthcare environment.

Mayer has had a lengthy career, with much of her emphasis during the past 15 years in the fields of hospitality and healthcare. She is accustomed to covering entire walls of lobbies and corridors with murals consisting of swirls of color suggesting landscapes both diverting and relaxing, and appealing to people, especially hospital patients, families and staff who can use the break. "My art isn't abstraction," she says, "because this can generate anxiety in people trying to figure it out. I create something recognizable, but leaving plenty of creative open space for the viewer to become engaged and part of the story."

This engagement occurs even while she's working on a mural, she says, noting how passersby observing progress day-by-day sometimes comment that they hope she doesn't finish too soon because

they enjoy watching the piece grow.

Mayer says this interactivity has been a cornerstone of her art, dating back to museum exhibits in her native New Orleans when she and a jazz musician would fasten on a particular person or object in the audience and do simultaneous visual/aural riffs on what they observed. Along with this Mayer enjoyed the dynamic visual arts, such as dance, and was intrigued with the idea of capturing dancers' motion in her art.

All of this made me wonder how I could go further in bringing the interactive and multimedia experience to viewers, engaging even more of the senses," says Mayer.

Enter, the collaboration with digital technology. "I've gathered around me some excellent technical people who can follow all of the creative



directions, depending on no particular computer program or restrictions on creativity. We successfully marry the art with the latest technology."

Mayer starts by developing a "storyboard" with the client, starting with traditional pen-and-ink sketches along with less traditional computer tablet art. She and her techie collaborators evolve these sketches into three- or four-minute segments playing off the motion of a but-

terfly, the sweep of a bird flying through the air, or trees and flowers blowing in the breeze. "We want images that will have a restful, diverting effect on viewers, the kind of art that evidence has shown to physically benefit hospital patients," says Mayer. Digitally added to this are music, ambient sounds—even smells, eventually, Mayer says: "the more senses involved, the better."

It all goes toward creating a sense-around experience Mayer calls “Ambient Art.”

Ambient Art can be displayed in a number of ways—on plasma screens, on walls 100 feet wide, on waiting room DVD players, on overhead computer projectors, and on interactive TV screens that hospitals are introducing increasingly at bedside. Mayer says there is even some notion—surprise, surprise—of creating an Ambient Art “app” for the iPhone.

Lest this all sound a bit fanciful in this era of hard-nosed hospital budgeting, Mayer points to a recent study indicating that art of this type actually led patients and families to view hospitals more positively not just for their environments, but for their quality of care. Researchers based at HKS Architects, American Art Resources, and WHR Architects found that Ambient Art with sound significantly outperformed aquariums with or without sound and “still art” in calming children’s behavior in pediatric waiting areas. “In general, it improves the overall perception of the hospital,” Mayer says.

Another budget-friendly possibility, she says, is the ability to readily update the imagery from time to time. “It’s not just replacing one fixed investment with another,” she says. “This art has a life of its own, and can easily evolve with new imagery, new locations, or new types of presentation.”

In short, coming your way is a very 21st-century take on art for the healthcare environment. **HD**

For further information and sample art, visit www.catherine-mayer.com.

