

Artist Jean-Pierre Hébert

Jean-Pierre Hébert was born in Calais, France, in 1939. He vividly remembers his passionate response, at age eight, to a large exhibit of Mondrian paintings. He started drawing classes at age nine and began a lifelong practice of keeping sketchbooks. Hébert spent summers with his grandparents in Vence, a village near Provence, where he frequented Galerie Les Mages (later Galerie Chave). At the gallery and around the neighborhood, he often saw new work from the avant-garde such as Man Ray, Max Ernst, Chagall, Picasso and Léger. Alphonse Chave, director of Les Mages, encouraged his young friend to explore the gallery's attics and storage rooms filled with art brut and folk art. Hébert learned to paint and looked at a great variety of art, including work from the Bauhaus and ancient Chinese brush paintings. In 1959, while an engineering student, Hébert held a summer job with IBM where he learned his first computer programming language, FORTRAN. In the early 60's he formed a business consulting firm which involved computer systems and gradually became interested in using computers to express his own ideas. In the early 70's he owned his first computer, an early model from Hewlett Packard. A few years later he acquired his first drawing device, an HP pen plotter, and proceeded to test his ideas about constructing geometric forms and patterns.

Through the 1980's, Hébert's fascination with natural algorithmic patterns and abstract concepts in math and physics coalesced with his computer interests. He saw the computer as a "tool for the mind", and his plotter as a replacement for his hand, allowing a direct connection between his mind and his finished works of art. Exploring what is now known as *computational drawing*, Hébert proceeded to compose computer code to realize ever more complex and mesmerizing images on a variety of plotters. In 1983, he moved to the United States, settling in Santa Barbara, California in 1984 to raise a family and devote himself full time to making art. In 1989, Hébert's first solo exhibition was presented by Galerie Chave in Vence, entitled "Sans lever la plume" (Without Lifting a Pen). His images appeared to float and curve in three dimensional space, and evoked a variety of cultural and natural iconography, from Islamic tile patterns and undulating fabric, to spiraling seashells and water eddies. Later that year Hébert visited Boston, where he exhibited at his first of many Siggraph conventions for the computer graphics industry. There he met a few other artists who used personal software and plotters to realize their art. Relationships that began at Siggraph venues resulted in Hébert's participation in numerous international exhibitions investigating emerging relationships between traditional art and computers, physics, and mathematics. His works were often among those selected by Siggraph to travel around the globe to art centers, universities and other venues where the so-called "computer art" was presented to academia and the general public. Unfortunately, Hébert lost a large portion of his early 2-D and 3-D computer animation work as it was stored digitally in Laser Video Disc format that the manufacturer abandoned without offering users a way to transfer their work to other formats. Hébert remains as one of only a handful of fine artists who use computers to make art, but use only their own personal software.

In 2001 at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, Hébert participated in “Alien Intelligence”, a major exhibition investigating humanity’s rational yet mystical intercourse with new technology. There he showed a computerized kinetic sculpture “Ulysses”, which employed mechanisms of his own design to roll a ball across a tray of shimmering silica sand. Once installed, it was operated remotely by Hébert via the Internet. “Ulysses” slowly formed elaborate geometries, each of which was smoothed away by an attendant after completion. This work, often referred to as a “sand garden” emphasized and embodied his growing interest in Zen Buddhism, and is part of a burgeoning body of kinetic works. In 2002, Hébert practice expanded into several new media. He began to explore organic algorithmic drawing devices such as paint-dripping pendulums and bubble-blowing tools. Hébert once again developed video animations with a “painter’s palette” of digital photo samples from the web, creating complex symmetries for plasma displays and video projections. Meanwhile, to better understand the drawings made by his “sand gardens”, he started to photograph or videotape their patterns under natural or theatrical lighting. Other projects include using his kinetic devices to scribe copper plates for editions of intaglio prints, and writing software for large format digital printers to make images not possible with plotters. Hébert’s amazing productivity belies the fact that his software could allow unlimited copies of his works. In fact, only rarely has more than a single drawing made before a file is retired.

In 2003 Hébert’s and his work intersected the scientific community in a new way when he was appointed Artist-in-Residence at the Kavli Institute for Theoretical Physics (KITP) located at University of California, Santa Barbara. KITP has installed a permanent collection of Hébert’s drawings and their lobby space features a pair of plasma displays on which he streams his animations and other content. He continues programming for plotters and kinetic devices, but now frequently collaborates with the Institute’s visiting physicists, engineers, and music composers, to conceive and realize new works of art. In 2007, Hébert was appointed an Artist-in-Residence for the Allosphere Project at the California Nano Systems Institute (CNSI) where a large spherical multi-media room is being built. For Hébert, the Allosphere is simply another tool for the mind. Right now, he must first learn to use it.

In the Fall of 2008, the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum will debut an exhibition of Hébert’s new work including kinetic sculptures, digital video animations, and large format works on paper. Also slated for 2008 is his participation in exhibitions at Pratt Institute of Art in New York and at the Block Museum of Art in Illinois.

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