

# At the Museums

By Anthony L. Harvey\*

**SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM**  
 8th & F Sts., NW;  
 info., 633-1000  
 Daily, 11:30am-7pm

In a captivating museum exhibition displaying the art and archival objects of Nam June Paik, the Korean-born polymath and protean creator of video art as a world wide phenomenon, the museum is celebrating its establishment as the center for international study of Paik's accomplishments, ideas, and influence on 20th century art with the opening to the public of the Nam June Paik archive, acquired by the museum from the Paik estate in 2009, and the museum's continuing permanent installation of several of Paik's most important artworks.

Born in 1932 in Seoul during the Japanese occupation, Paik first moved with his parents to Hong Kong and subsequently to Tokyo where he studied music and composition. Following college graduation, Paik continued his studies in Germany where he became associated with such avant garde artists as John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Joseph Beuys, and Wolfe Vostell.

In 1963, as a veteran of the neo-Dada

movement known as Fluxus, Paik launched his career with a show called "Exposition of Music-Electronic Television" in Wuppertal, West Germany. It featured television sets scattered about an exhibition platform with magnets attached to certain individual sets, the magnets serving to distort the images. One of the stars of that show, a wonderfully shaggy-dog artwork consisting of a television screen displaying nothing but a straight and narrow white line titled *Zen for TV*, is in the show. It, together with a second example, is from the museum's own collection; the first displays a vertical line, the second a horizontal one.

The following year Paik moved to New York and immediately continued his path-breaking work by, for example, video recording the traffic jam created by the Pope's 1964 visit to Manhattan. Using that example, and other television feed from collaborating public television stations in

Boston and New York, Paik began exploring the many ways this new electronic world could both document and distort our perceptions of reality. Paik either engineered his own recording device or used one of Sony's prototypes or one of the first commercially available cameras.

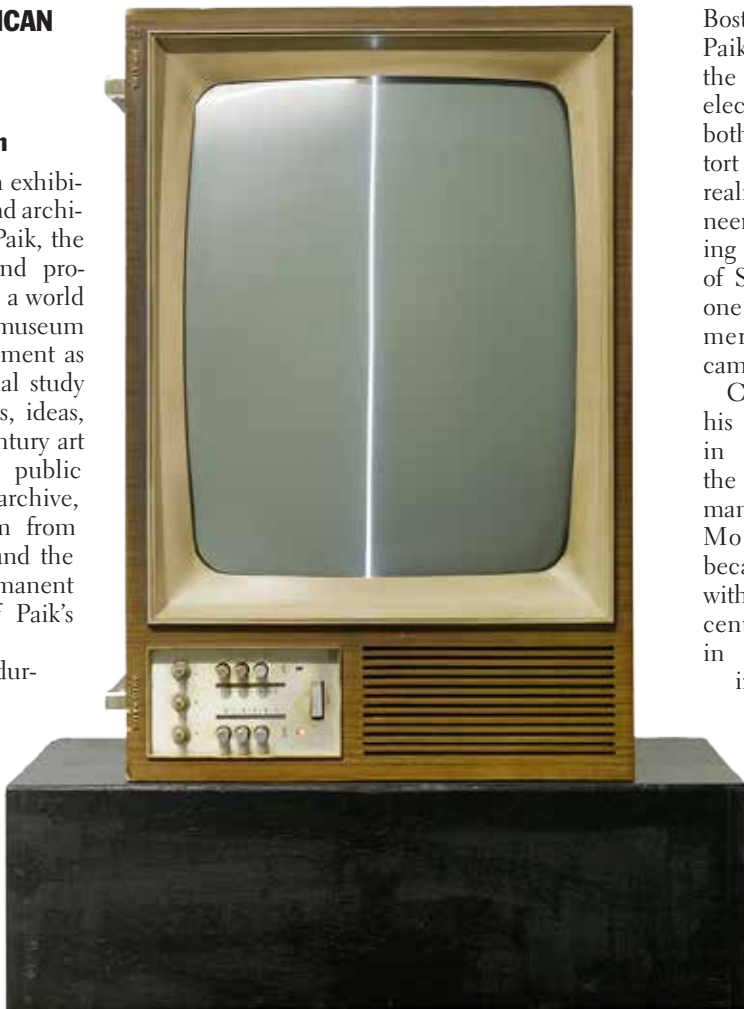
Continuing with his musical work, and in collaboration with the cellist and performance artist Charlotte Moorman, Paik became more famous with Moorman's indecent exposure arrest in 1967 for appearing in an ensemble work with her naked cello and her own bare breasts. In later appearances, Moorman's breasts were covered with miniature TV sets.

Chance and chaos, together with the many ways that electronic technology, aesthetic crea-

tions, found objects, random sounds, and the spontaneity of performances interact – all these became factors and phenomena in the works of Paik and his collaborating artists.

The exhibition's 67 artworks and more than 140 objects and items from the Paik archive give viewers, in the words at the press briefing of the show's organizer, senior Smithsonian curator John G. Hanhardt, the leading expert on Paik and his global influence, "the opportunity to experience a full portrait of the artist and also recognizes Paik's desire to astonish through a playful aesthetic. It has surprises both for those viewers who have never experienced Paik and for those who feel they know his art."

Other delightful, and intriguing, internationally-known examples of Paik's artwork included in the show, several of which are rarely seen outside of their American or overseas collections, include his hilarious *TV Clock*, consisting of 24 fixed image color TV monitors mounted on 24 pedestals from the Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Paik's tongue-in-cheek *TV Cello*, from the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis; and the spectacular *TV Garden*, from the Solomon R. Guggenheim



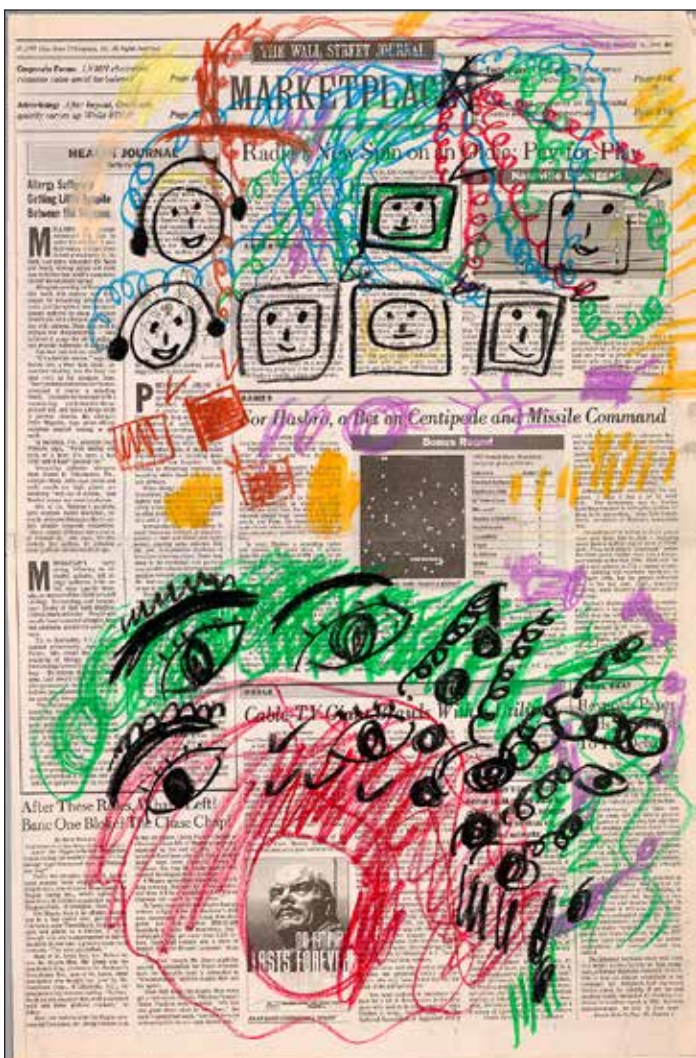
*Zen for TV* (1963/1982). Manipulated television set; black and white, silent.



*Merce/Digital* (1988). Single channel video sculpture with vintage television cabinets and fifteen monitors; color, silent.

Museum in New York. Important additional works from the Smithsonian's own collection in the show include the iconic "*Untitled (Robot)* [PaikBot]" and the two permanently installed artworks of 1995 –

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*Untitled (Newspaper Drawing)* (ca. 1990s). Oil stick on printed newsprint.



*Untitled (Robot)* [PaikBot] (1992) Single-channel video in robot-shaped assemblage of televisions, radio and stereo system parts, and metal hardware.



Objects from the Nam June Paik Archive, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

## MUSEUMS

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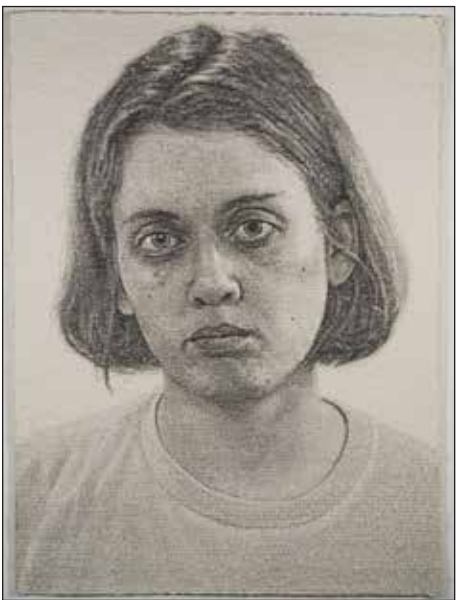
the huge, mesmerizing banks of TV monitors titled *Megatron/Matrix* and *Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii*.

An important and lavishly illustrated scholarly catalog accompanies this groundbreaking exposition, which continues through August 11, 2013. □

### NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

8th & F Sts., NW; info., 633-1000  
Daily, 11:30am-7pm / www.npg.si.edu

In a fascinating and novel approach to the question of assembling a group show of six contemporary portrait artists, the Portrait Gallery brought together six of its own professional staff and assigned each – two of them as a team – the task of selecting an individual, leading edge artist for a presentation of portraits that combined identifiable images with new ways of depicting the resultant six different sets of images, as well as



Ben Durham, *Betty* (2009).

in the use of new and unusual materials to serve as the physical media of these portraits suitable for visual display in a white wall gallery environment.

The results of this effort are now on display in an exhibition entitled “Portraiture Now: Drawing on the Edge,” installed in six separate small rooms at the National Portrait Gallery—one room for each of the six art-

ists with additional works on display on the central hallway walls outside each room. The show is a subtle and understated block buster. The six artists, whose works are quite different, one from the others, are terrific, and the objectives of the Gallery appear to be wonderfully realized. The artistic portraits on display are both intricately and richly crafted. They immediately engage the viewer in their stunningly inventive techniques and their use of content-rich and multiply overlaid techniques that visually enhance their immediate impressions. These differing techniques range from Till Freiwald’s intriguing and enigmatic blended and built-up, translucent watercolor portraits to Adam Chapman’s ingenious high-tech electronic portraits which, employing a custom made computer program, create recognizable pen and wash portraits from “a series of generative drawings on paper in which programmatic rules are applied to colored lines and washes that swim around the composition”—this according to the artist. These six portrait artists share many profound similarities, however, the first of which is an obviously deep humanistic empathy with the subjects of their respective artistic visions. This, and the consistently stellar aesthetic accomplishments of their individual works tie these portraits together into a compatibly effective group show.

Till Freiwald and Rob Matthews open the exhibition in gallery rooms directly across from each other. Freiwald’s somber watercolors present his sitters in head-on and profile, muted color portraits with dead-pan, expressionless faces—with the exception of his powerfully moving monochromatic (or black and white) depiction of his no longer living younger brother Mael. Freiwald works from live models, photographs, and his own memory of the person whose portrait he’s constructing. Matthews’ many small, round graphite drawings of his family and close friends reflect the artist’s extraordinary skills



Till Freiwald, *Giu* (2008).

as a draftsman and the quiet repose of his sitters. Deeply religious, Matthews presents his subjects holding objects that serve to identify his subjects. These objects, notes Matthews, and the hand gestures of individual subjects, “act as symbols for geography, lineage, work, faith, and mortality.” Matthews’s 21 beautifully drawn portraits and their attributes work both individually and as an assemblage; they lack bite, however, and are disturbingly peaceful. Larger works by Matthews, which are on display this month in Philadelphia, some of which are accessible on-line, further display his bravura draftsmanship, this time with a bite.

Moving to the next pair of artists, Ben Durham’s works are made from graphite text, which he first records from his own stream of consciousness recollections and then transcribes onto handmade paper in layer upon layer of handwritten strips, building his monochromatic or black portrait images from the contrast of the darkness of the written text and the whiteness of the paper. The



Mequitta Ahuja, *Mocoonama* (2011).

inspirations for Durham’s are mug shots of people he grew up with in Lexington, Kentucky; his source is an “on-line data bases of arrest records from his home town.” The results are as mysterious as the process itself. Durham describes his “layering of this text to build tonal features of the face as rendering the majority of the content unreadable. The soft texture of the handmade paper tears under the force of the pencil, and the words get lost among the palimpsest of information.” His

large, troubling portraits display an empathy belying their mug shot provenance. I wonder, though, if these three large portrait subjects—“Betty”, “Steven”, and “Kris”—are equally impressed with the artist’s ingenuity—and of his sending their portraits and provenance out into the tender mercies of the art world.

With her exuberantly colorful and flamboyantly expressive portraits, Mequitta Ahuja is the star of the show. Ahuja describes her multi-layered collaged, painted, and stamped concoctions—her self-portraits—as auto-mythic in the school of automythography, which she defines as “a process of identify formation that combines the real with the self-invented.” With sources as varied as Buddhist wall paintings and Mughal manuscript art and an African-American and South Asian-American ancestry, Ahuja

summarizes her triumphant and obviously joyous approach to self portraiture in these words: “The physicality of my technique is mirrored by my protagonist’s assertive pres-

ence. She is both subject and maker of her world.” Her beautiful and regal self portrait called “Mocoonama”, an acrylic, colored pencil, and enamel painting on stamped and collaged vellum will imprint itself on your visual memory.

The final two artists are Adam Chapman and Mary Borgman. Seven individual Chapman high-tech portraits and a grid of nine small portrait images will delight the viewer; as noted above, they are astonishing and no doubt mimic the ways in which human retinas and optic nerves transmit impulses to the brain and how the whole apparatus of human vision forms images. Borgman’s work consists of larger than life monumental charcoal drawings of handsome, macho appearing men of multiple ethnic backgrounds who she meets in the course of teaching at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri and spending time in coffee shops. Borgman draws in charcoal on frosted mylar and her handsome portraits have a compellingly luminous quality to them. An especially engaging work is entitled “Portrait of Tomiwa with Arms Crossed.”

“Portraiture Now: Drawing on the Edge” continues through August 18, 2013. An informative, illustrative pamphlet accompanies the exhibition. □



Till Freiwald, *Mael* (2008).

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\*Anthony L. Harvey is a collector of contemporary art, with an emphasis on Washington artists. He is a founding member of the Washington Review of the Arts. For many years he was the staff person in the

United States Senate responsible for arts and Library of Congress oversight by the Senate’s Rules and Administration Committee and the House and Senate’s Joint Committee on the Library.