

# Galleries without walls: Artists 'hang' their work on the Web

By Russell McCulley Staff Writer

THIS SUMMER, ARTIST Jedd Haas unveiled a new series of relief prints at the opening of his exhibition "Embedded Systems: Analog Prints From the Machine World." But the opening featured no cheese tray, no complimentary wine, no well-heeled patrons craning their necks to get a closer look at Haas's mechanically inspired work.

That's because Gallery Tungsten, a project the artist kicked off three years ago, exists mostly on-line. For now, Haas is the gallery's sole exhibitor, but he hopes to add more artists to the roster.

"My plans for the business are to bring in a lot more artists," he says, providing a database of "thousands and thousands of pieces that, obviously, can't be exhibited in a physical space."

Gallery Tungsten has a physical space, high in an office building at 333 St. Charles Ave., that can be visited by appointment. Haas's prints, paintings and drawings line the walls of the space that houses his Web site development company, EPS Inc.

Haas, who moved to New Orleans eight years ago, envisions a time when Gallery Tungsten's two aspects — the virtual gallery and the one people can walk into — will complement each other. He plans to keep a small inventory of work from different artists for viewing in person, as most galleries do now, with more extensive exhibits available on-line.

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"The Web is really going to serve more as a way for people to see the work and then come in," he says. "Few people are going to buy art without actually seeing it."

On the other hand, he points out, some media — prints and photographs, for example — translate well on the Web page, and some artists are using technology to create Internet-only artworks.

It is too early to tell if the Internet will do for the art business what Amazon.com has done for book sales. But gallery owners are turning to the Web in greater numbers.

"Traditional galleries are just now getting their feet wet," says Gilbert Edelson, administrative vice president with the Art Dealers Association of America in New York. "Two years ago, I don't think more

than a handful of our members had their own site. Now, more than half do."

Most of those sites are used to promote the gallery itself, not for direct sales, Edelson says. But the type of art that sells well through catalogs — less expensive prints, graphics and photographs — could prove equally lucrative on the web.

"We don't know how all this will go," he says.

Some local galleries are getting in on the ground floor. "The Internet is a very visual tool, and it's very compatible with the kind of visual art I handle," says Jonathan Ferrara, artist and owner of the gallery that bears his name. As people become

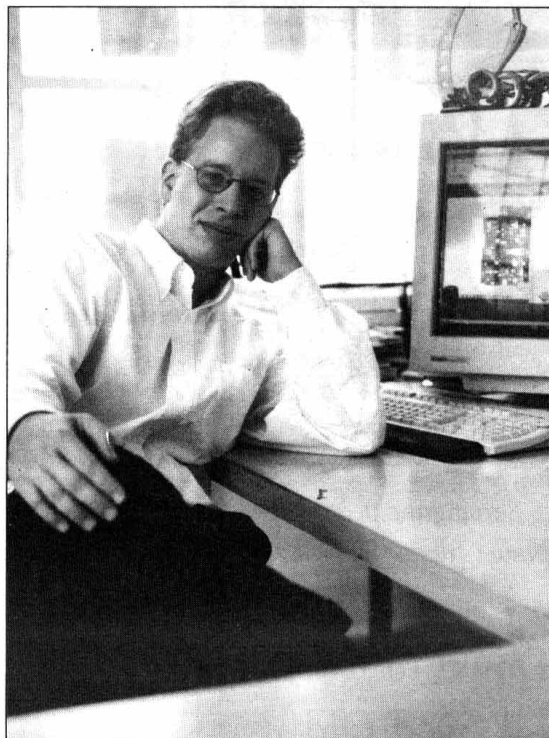
more accustomed to looking at — and shopping for — art on the Internet, galleries that have not established a presence there, or learned how to make their sites interesting, "are going to be playing catch-up," he says.

Ferrara's Web site features a schedule of exhibitions, with samples of work, and changes each month to highlight current shows. "I've never sold anything over the Internet," he says. "But it's a perfect visual reference."

Ferrara includes his Web address, which receives about 125 "hits" a month, on business cards, invitations and print ads. Lately he has seen a lot of "previsit interest" from tourists coming to town for the Degas exhibit at the New Orleans Museum of Art who want to tour local galleries.

Those visitors, he says, will be able to keep up with changing exhibitions between trips to New Orleans. And Ferrara, himself an artist, uses e-mail to transmit images to out-of-town clients — a faster and more cost-effective method than putting together packets of slides or photos. "I have sold work that way," he says.

Some gallery owners are still waiting for their Web site investments to pay off. Richard Nesbitt of d.o.c.s. Gallery has maintained a five-"page" site for two years. "It has not been effective for the amount of money I've spent on it," he says. In addition to the initial design fee, start-up costs to get onto a server and payments for listings on popular search engines, Nesbitt estimates that he spends \$400 to maintain and "rehang" his site each month.



Artist Jedd Haas hopes to market his works through a Web-based gallery.

"So far, I've had two people say they came in because they saw my Web site," he says, "and one of them was an artist."

Still, Nesbitt and others are betting that the art business on-line will grow as people become more accustomed to Internet commerce.

"Eight months ago, I would have laughed if you said I'd be spending thousands of dollars on eBay," he says. "But eBay and Amazon.com have changed the way normal folks look at things. And I think that in the long run, that may help people like me and my art gallery. I'm still not looking at it as a

way to sell art. But if I've sold through my ad in ArtNews, why not on the Internet?"

Gallery Tungsten's site makes it easy for clients to do just that; Haas has devised an on-line order form that includes framing options, calculates sales tax and takes credit cards.

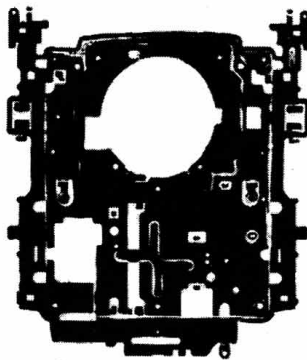
But for most people, buying art is more complicated than ordering a book or compact disk, and selling it is an art in itself.

"For me, Internet advertising serves to get you to come into my gallery," says Nesbitt.

"I'm a much better salesman than my Web site will ever be."

And while technology has come a long way, the computer screen still cannot convey the visual punch of the best painting, the purists say.

"I still believe there's no substitute for the work of art," says Edelson. "If you've ever sat through an art history class and looked at all those slides, you know it's a totally different experience when you walk into a museum and see these magnificent paintings up close."\*



Haas used machine parts to create this relief print, "Flatplate Floppy."

PHOTO BY AMY DICKERSON