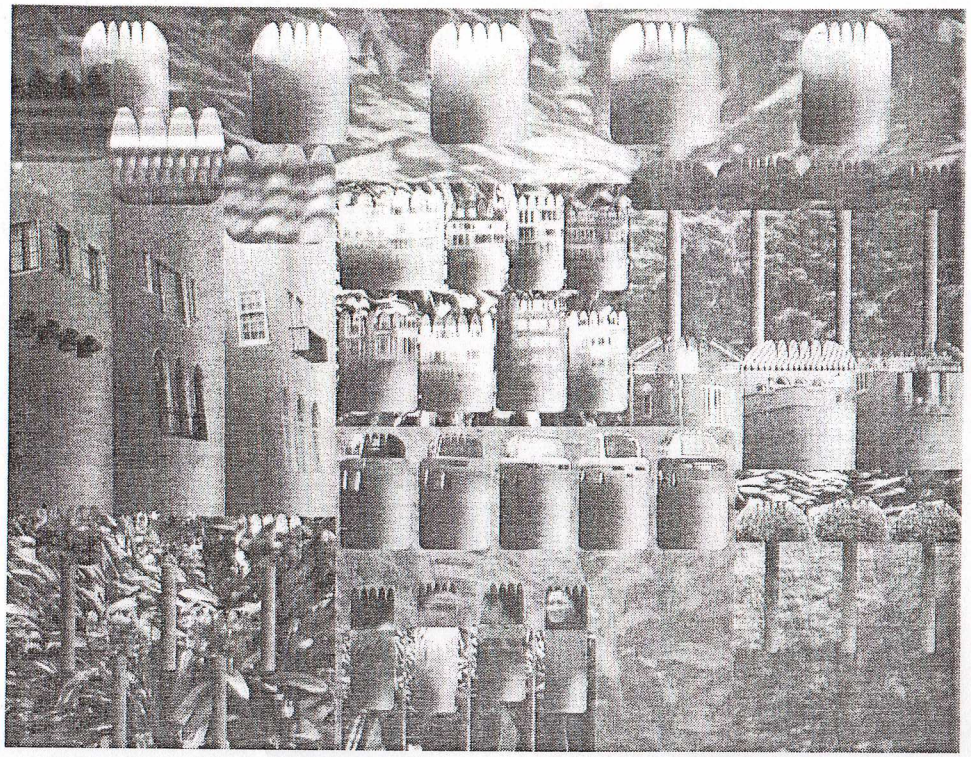
Alternate Realities

Before the Renaissance, Western paintings were flat as artists struggled with portraying depth in a realistic and convincing manner. Buildings ended up catawampus and backgrounds were given just as much detail of things that were supposed to be in the foreground. Renaissance artists sought a scientific method of portraying space in terms of three dimensions: height, width and depth. It was that third dimension that had been lacking and the goal was to get as close to realism as possible.

The result of their efforts was linear perspective, which exploited architecture for the sake of defining space on a two-dimensional plane. (It had to use manmade structures since nature doesn't have straight lines.) This system, which is also called scientific perspective, employed vanishing points to which the straight lines of a building could recede. Roof lines, bricks and window sills pointed to a distant vanishing point—an arbitrary point or points on the horizon line set up by the artist. Perceived depth!

In the early 20th century Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque reinvented how we think of space in artistic terms, although it had been tinkered with by the Impressionist and Post-Impressionists in the previous generation. Picasso and Braque, through the creation of Cubism, depicted multiple viewpoints of one subject in a single picture. If you think about it, that's really how we view our world. We don't remain static and absorb only one side of an object or one vantage point of a landscape. We move around. Our eyes wander back and forth as we try to gather as much information as possible.

Oh, what Picasso could have done with a computer! To be sure, digitally manipulated art is not widely accepted by the artworld. Many of the cognoscenti still insist that the texture of a brush stroke on canvas or the imprint of a thumb on clay is preferable to the slick surface of a computer-generated image. But for those of us who struggle to crop a photo or create a simple GIF file for a web-site, it is fascinating to see what an artist can do with Photoshop, CorelDRAW and the countless other programs that are available for their use.



Les Barta's *San Francisco Flowers,* digital art.

In his artist statement that accompanies "Altered Image," a somewhat misnamed exhibit now at Lincoln Center Galleries, artist Lanse Kleaveland writes, "In the Renaissance, concern for spatial constructs was a hallmark of the age. The desire was to master space so as to manifest it, to make it intelligible." Space is key to understanding Kleavland's digital art, which is "vector-based," meaning it is rooted in mathematical formulas rather than manipulated images. He's seeking a virtual space that, if he had the right equipment (and a lot of it), could be fully animated.

Kleaveland turned to digital art somewhat out of necessity. His cabin outside of Idaho Springs does not accommodate his large-scale paintings, so he works on the computer and with a camera in the winter while taking his painting outdoors in the summer. His first attempts at digital art used bits imagery, like the spindle form seen in *Aeon III*, and a program that was also used to animate dinosaurs in a movie. However, Kleaveland has left all real-world objects behind and is now more interested in creating his own reality based on a purely visual experience. You might see his organic lines and shapes and relate them to something you already know, but Kleaveland doesn't have any preconceived ideas for you. His jewel-like colors are enlivened by a refracted light that gives a sense of transparent color. I related them to blown glass from the Dale Chihuly factory, but I also found metallic wrapping papers and ribbons—something I know the artist did not intend.

In contrast, Illinois artist Les Barta, cuts, pastes and alters existing images in the spirit of a Picasso collage (his Synthetic Cubist phase). Fragments of disparate photographs are combined to create surreal narratives that are closer to René Magritte than Picasso. *San Francisco Flowers* is set up on a grid, similar to a quilt but much less rigid. The artist used a repetitive shape to unify the composition. Buildings on the top are crowned with turrets. The protrusions from this shape, coincidentally, also resemble petals and crowns, which appear in other sections.

While some of the photographic snippets retain their realistic state, Barta's space is flat and in stark contrast to the infinite space in Kleaveland's work. Instead of distant objects losing clarity or growing smaller, all parts are treated equally. The layering of images, which often helps define a deeper space, negates it or, better said, confuses it. Space isn't paramount. Kleaveland seeks what he calls "the poetics of vision," his fancy term for deriving sensuous, colorful forms that appeal to our souls out of a math-based technology. Barta, on the other hand, manipulates recognizable images that appeal to our imagination and playful side.

Both ponder alternative possibilities.

Altered Images
Lincoln Center Galleries
417 W. Magnolia Ave.
221-6735
Monday-Friday 8 a.m.-5:30 p.m.
Saturday 12:30-5:30 p.m.
Through February 28