



not only celebrating Curie's tremendous scientific achievements, but honoring her for the immense struggle she endured as a woman—breaking into a completely closed, male, scientific community. Another implication that can be considered in this work is that Curie's discoveries in the field of physics led ultimately to the development of atomic energy and eventually the atomic bomb, making her, like Einstein, an unwilling accomplice to the creation of this ultimate weapon of destruction.

One interpretation of *Madame Curie* is that her expansive fields of flowers sway in a slowly moving "atomic wind"—the residual force created by the detonation of a nuclear weapon.⁹ Seen in this context, Steinkamp pairs the notion of extraordinary beauty with the suggestion of ultimate destruction.

Alternately, if Steinkamp's visually seductive video installation is taken as representing or symbolizing gestation or some emergent state of proliferating natural or cosmic forces, the piece can be interpreted as an unabashedly sensuous affirmation of beauty, mystery, and creativity. In this work is a glimpse of the Sublime.

For some, *Madame Curie* might imply that even in this rapidly evolving technological era, nature is awe-inspiring and is still what connects us. What Steinkamp presents before our eyes, however, is not nature. However realistic, the illusion of Steinkamp's universe of floating gardens is not "real." It is computer generated. Virtual. Artificial. It's "fake nature," as the artist herself describes it, and in fact she refers to her work as "Artificial Natures."¹⁰

As our lives continue to be increasingly mediated by advances in technology and artificial realities, what this does to the human experience and consciousness is perhaps what this extraordinary work of art by Jennifer Steinkamp asks us to consider.

In either case, or however one chooses to interpret *Madame Curie*, Steinkamp silently pays tribute to one of the greatest women of the 20th century, while eliciting the precarious dichotomy between beauty and danger, creation and destruction, female and male. It is this fusion of beauty, poetry, science, and an underlying inquiry into the human experience at the beginning of the 21st century that makes Steinkamp's work so strong, so inevitable.

Margo Ann Crutchfield
Curator at Large
Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech

Madame Curie, 2011 was originally commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Calif. This presentation at the Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech is the first East Coast exhibition of the work.



Judy Crook (2012-2013)

Orbit (2003-2011) Details
Spring sequence (top), summer sequence (middle), fall sequence (bottom)

Related Programs

My Take Talks: Ruth C. Horton Gallery

A series of short, informal talks in which individuals in our community share their "take" on the art featured in the galleries. Join us for a stimulating exchange of ideas in a relaxed atmosphere.

Nov. 1, 7:20 PM Holly Scoggins: *director, Hahn Horticulture Garden; associate professor, Department of Horticulture, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences*

Nov. 7, 7:20 PM Elizabeth Mazzolini: *assistant professor, Department of English; affiliate, Departments of Science and Technology in Society and Women's and Gender Studies program, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences*

Nov. 8, 5:00 PM Joe Merola: *professor, Department of Chemistry, College of Science*

Nov. 15, 7:20 PM Doug Bowman: *director, Center for Human-Computer Interaction; professor, Department of Computer Science, College of Engineering*

Related Exhibition

Jennifer Steinkamp's *Judy Crook* (2012-2013) is on view in the exhibition *Two Trees: Rona Pondick and Jennifer Steinkamp* at the Armory Gallery, School of Visual Arts, College of Architecture and Urban Studies, Virginia Tech. October 25–November 22, 2013

About the Artist

Jennifer Steinkamp lives in Los Angeles. She is represented by Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York and Hong Kong; ACME Gallery, Los Angeles; and Greengrassi, London.

Steinkamp has worked in and out of the academic and commercial world doing freelance technical and animation work in New York and Los Angeles. She studied at the Art Center College of Design, the California Institute of the Arts, and the California Institute of Technology. She has a Bachelor of Fine Arts (1989) and Master of Fine Arts (1991) from the Art Center College of Design and is now a tenured professor in the Design/Media Arts Department at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Steinkamp gained international prominence in 2003 with her participation in the 8th Istanbul Biennial and has since exhibited her work at major museums and galleries in Canada, the United States, China, Egypt, England, South Korea, and Spain. Her work is in major museum and private collections.

For a complete biography see JSteinkamp.com.

Published to accompany the exhibition Jennifer Steinkamp: *Madame Curie* on view October 28 – December 1, 2013 at the Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech.

Curated by Margo Ann Crutchfield, curator at large

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Endnotes

- 1 Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego installation of *Madame Curie* as described in Morian, Kinsee. "Jennifer Steinkamp: *Madame Curie*:" *San Diego City Beat* Apr 5, 2011.
- 2 Morian, Kinsee. "Jennifer Steinkamp: *Madame Curie*:" *San Diego City Beat* Apr 5, 2011. Interview with Kinsee Morian in which Steinkamp articulates her interest in atomic energy, her stance on nuclear energy, and the research that led her to Marie Curie.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Website exhibition description of the installation *Madame Curie*. Jan 2011. Also cited on the artist's website documentation of *Madame Curie*.
- 6 As cited by the artist on her website, jsteinkamp.com.
- 7 Steinkamp, Jennifer. "My Only Sunshine: Experiments with Light, Space, Sound and Motion." *Leonardo* Vol. 34 No. 2 (2001) pp. 109-112. Also cited in Falkenstein, Michelle. "Making the Trees Dance." *ArtNews* (June, 2004) p. 95.
- 8 As cited by the artist on her website, jsteinkamp.com.
- 9 Snyder, Drew. "Echoes of Atomic Wind." *Afterimage* Mar. 1, 2011.
- 10 Meyer, Kimberli. US Presentation 11th International Cairo Biennale. Los Angeles: MAK Center for Art and Architecture, 2011. Print.



JENNIFER STEINKAMP
Madame Curie

October 28–December 1, 2013

Ruth C. Horton Gallery

CENTER
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AT VIRGINIA TECH

A pioneer and one of the most accomplished artists working in digital media today, Jennifer Steinkamp is internationally recognized for her breathtaking installations of computer-generated projected imagery. *Madame Curie*, a multi-channel, synchronized projection of digital animation, is presented here as a spectacular 19-foot-high x 50-foot-wide, floor-to-ceiling display of intertwining flowers and branches that gently sway on the gallery wall. A profusion of daisies, fuchsia, periwinkle, rambler rose, Virginia creeper, wisteria, clovers, dahlias, dandelions, and more seem suspended, floating in a tranquil and quiet but unending rhythm.

Artificial Nature

Described as a “living, breathing, computer-generated painting,” the plants and flora represented in *Madame Curie* seem gently propelled and constrained by unseen forces “as if blowing in an ever-present, non-existent wind.”¹ And in the sweeping calm there is an underlying sense of imminence, of unseen cosmic forces—of immersion in an unending moment at the threshold of worlds in fusion or formation. This is an extraordinarily beautiful work of art—imbued with mystery and a sense of the uncanny.

This enveloping, panoramic video installation takes its name after the pioneering French scientist Marie Curie (1867–1934) and it is in the context of the life and work of this great scientist that the thematic underpinnings of the work unfold.

Steinkamp encountered references to Curie in her research on atomic energy and weapons.² Curie was not only the first woman to receive a Nobel Prize, but was the recipient of two Nobel Prizes and the only person to win the prize in multiple sciences for her groundbreaking work in physics (1903) and chemistry (1911). She was also the first female professor at the Sorbonne University in Paris. It was Curie who discovered the elements radium and polonium and established the theory of radioactivity. Equally inspiring to Steinkamp was Curie’s strength and resilience in the face of odds against her as a woman. “It was a miracle,” states Steinkamp, “that she was able to accomplish so much with so much against her.”³ Inspired by Curie’s immense scientific efforts and accomplishments as well as her fortitude in her personal and professional life, Steinkamp created and dedicated the video installation on view in her honor.

In her research, Steinkamp discovered that in addition to being one of the greatest scientific minds of the 20th century, Curie was also an avid gardener. In creating *Madame Curie*, Steinkamp decided to “use this little known and perhaps insignificant detail to make a peaceful homage to Curie’s brilliance.”⁴ The flowers represented in the work are drawn from a list of over 40 flowering plants found in Curie’s garden: apple blossoms, chestnut blooms, cypress, daisies, eucalyptus, fuchsia, gorse yellow, hawthorne, hop plant, laburnum, linden, mahonia, mimosa, passion flowers, periwinkle, rambler rose, Virginia creeper, and wisteria.⁵

In *Madame Curie*, however, Steinkamp depicts her majestic array of flowers by recreating

experience that reflects upon the increasing synthesis of our real and virtual worlds.

Even so, Steinkamp brings much more into this equation by extending and expanding her media—computer generated imagery—into three dimensional space, incorporating architecture, motion, and light as integral components of the work. In doing so, many of Steinkamp’s pieces can have the effect of transforming environments into immersive, sensorial experiences. Thematic content aside, Steinkamp’s art becomes as much about space, motion, and phenomenological perception.

In fact, Steinkamp describes herself as an installation artist who works with video and new media to explore ideas about architectural space, motion, and

them on the computer, entirely out of code. 3D modeling and animation software become the equivalent of paint, palette, and brushes for the artist. In this hyperreal representation of nature, Steinkamp juxtaposes the organic and the inorganic and the real and the unreal in an engaging yet subtly unsettling

perception.⁶ She aims to blur the perceptual parameters of architectural spaces by capitalizing on the interplay of actual and illusionistic space, and often speaks about her work in terms of “dematerializing architecture.”⁷

Spatial politics aside, Steinkamp’s works of art often engage history, legend, or fairy tales as their subject. In addition to *Madame Curie*, Steinkamp’s works with historical subjects include *Jimmy Carter* (2002), created with the former president’s legacy of peace and inclusive values in mind. In terms of Steinkamp’s use of fairytales, *Rapunzel* (2005) is one example, though fantasy and the fantastic in terms of visual enticement and reverie, are strains that consistently run throughout the artist’s work. *Eye Catching* (2003), often cited as the highlight of the Istanbul Biennial that year, was a remarkable installation in the Yerebatan Cistern, or “Sunken Palace” beneath the historical center of Constantinople. This sequence of luminous, digital trees with swirling, entangled branches reflected on the cistern’s walls and pools of water reference Sufi dervishes and the legendary Greek deity Medusa.

Much of Steinkamp’s art, however, alludes to scientific subjects such as *Einstein’s Dilemma* (2003) or *Daisy Bell* (2008). With its streaming cascade of virtual flowers, *Daisy Bell* refers to the historical moment in 1962 when Bell Labs used the IBM 704 to voice synthesize the 19th century English song “Daisy Bell.”⁸ Another work of art, *Orbit* (2003-2011)—a resplendent depiction of trees cycling through the seasons—refers to both to astronomy and the forces of nature.



Daisy Bell, 2008

All of these works, however mesmerizing on their surfaces, are nuanced with sociopolitical and ethical considerations. *Einstein’s Dilemma* elicits the question of personal responsibility and morality in regard to the potentially destructive consequences of science. Likewise, a number of issues infuse the floral canopy in *Madame Curie*. The work can be seen as a feminist statement,



Madame Curie, 2011
Detail

Front Cover:
Jennifer Steinkamp
Madame Curie, 2011 (Detail)
Originally commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego
Video installation: site-specific, multi-channel, synchronized projection
Artist Proof
Courtesy of the artist; Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York and Hong Kong; ACME Gallery, Los Angeles; and Greengrass Gallery, London
Photo by Robert Wedemeyer