

Science fact or fiction

Two artists intersect in *Summer Solos* at the Contemporary

FELICIA FEASTER — JULY 1, 2004

One day we may witness wealthy tourists jetting into outer space on adventure vacations, but it seems a constant of human experience that the closer science brings us to the heart of things, the more we recognize the limitations to our knowledge. Will a visit to Mars quench some insatiable longing to know, or only remind celestial tourists that they are mere dust specks in the solar system?

Prema Murthy and Michael Oliveri's work at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center operates from just such a contradiction. In Oliveri's video projections of endlessly curling ocean waves and Murthy's prints of a vast video game universe, the artists show how we are drawn to humbling contemplations of the infinite.

These two conceptually kindred spirits featured in the second of the Contemporary's *Summer Solos* shows both acknowledge the human desire to look into the vast, black void of the universe and the occasionally cliched and conventional ways we "intersect" with that great unknown.

Oliveri's epic, multifaceted installation *Fast Food, Hydrocarbons and Waves in Outer Space* combines wide-eyed wonder at the universe's power, with a jokey look at human attempts to understand it.

Comedy and awe collide in "NASA Nourishment," Oliveri's kooky installation featuring a mock-laboratory where tomato seeds become plants using hydroponic growing techniques. Though it's high tech as all get out, Oliveri's futuristic nursery marries a form of novelty and science that can resemble the goofiest, most primitive experiments with the natural world like sea monkeys and ant farms.

The odd mix of research and monkeying around is echoed in the look of Oliveri's lab, indebted as much to movie set design as it is to science. The walls are draped in shiny silver Mylar (a la Warhol's Factory) and the various hydroponics apparatuses emit a white noise hum, making the whole growingscape look like something future-tripping designer Pierre Cardin might have dreamed up in the '60s.

Oliveri seems to marvel at the technology that allows plants to grow quickly, and in water instead of soil, but the work can inspire more cynical thoughts as well, of whether fast growing is better than the natural world order that forces human beings to measure time on *its* clock. And the growth of these plants in water with nary a trace of soil offers further commentary on the increasingly artificial processes involved in giving life.

If "NASA Nourishment" can be a disquieting meditation on what science can achieve, then Oliveri's video projections of ocean waves render awe at the wonders of the natural world. Oliveri plays with color, rendering his waves in intense test-pattern colors to enhance their *Liquid Sky* psychedelic effect, reminiscent of the vintage wave-worship in Bruce Brown's 1960s *Surf Crazy* cinema.

Alongside his videos of killer tubeage, Oliveri presents four digital prints called "Strategies in Waiting" that feature surfers bobbing in the middle of an infinite, calm ocean, waiting for the perfect swell. Unlike the NASA tomato plants grown on a demanding human time frame, these surfers looking out expectantly into nothingness assure us that the waves still punch their own clock.

