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Dot-com Expressionism

Art springs from the pyre of the New Economy

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by Anne Sengès

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SAN FRANCISCO, March 19 (AFP) - When Jamie Michael got laid off last September from her dot-com job at a San Francisco online advertising agency, all she had left was a box full of her own now-useless business cards.

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But instead of whining and screaming, the 24-year-old ex-dot-commer, who is also an artist in her free time, started thinking about "all the neat things we could do with all the propaganda that had been generated by dot-coms."

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"Dot-gone," a mixed-media installation exploring the social ramifications of the recent success and failure of the dot-com industry, was born, and so was "fAMOUS," a group of three Bay-Area artists (Jamie Michael, Lacey Hanada and Xenia Jordan, who all met as undergraduates at the University of California at Berkeley) whose collective work will be shown at the Lair of the Minotaur, a San Francisco art gallery, starting April 12th (<http://www.wearefamous.com>)

"fAMOUS offers a critique of the dot-com phenomenon by addressing issues of overnight success, media sensationalism, technology and the instability of the stock market," claims the press release.

But for fAMOUS team member Lacey Hanada, 21, "dot-gone" is not about dot-com bashing.

"We are not trying to judge dot-commers," she says. "A lot of people had invested so much time and energy into it. We just want to show what went wrong, what happened and how these people were affected."

Visitors will be welcomed by a wall installation of the NASDAQ's rise and fall. They will wander through a re-created dot-com office full of "dot-com IKEA-like furniture," and embellished by a surreal portrait gallery of former dot-com CEOs such as Julie Wainwright from Pets.com. Business cards of former dot-commers will be displayed, homage to the individuals who were part of the dot-com revolution but hardly recognized for their work.

"The show originated from the ex-employees' point of view, offering people who have donated their business cards" -- fAMOUS received about 400 of them - "a chance to come and say: We were part of this movement," says dot-bombed Jamie Michael.

The cards will be tied together to symbolize the giant mass of people who lost their jobs. "But the display has been organized so that if one card is missing, you'll see the hole: It's really a way to recognized the dot-commers individually," says fAMOUS member Xenia Jordan, 23, who works as an architect.

While "dot-gone" is a critique of the dot-com phenomenon, Michael, Hanada and Jordan admit that they too had believed in it.

"We all laugh about it now, but we really thought it was happening. People were buying homes thinking about the value of their stock options, which may not have been the brightest decision, but at the time that was what you did and everyone believed in it. It was everyone's fault. We all thought it was real," says Jordan.

"Had I had money to invest, I would have invested in the NASDAQ," admits Hanada. "People are very cynical and anti-dot-com right now, but this is not what we are trying to be," ads Michael. And all over the Bay Area, artists are finding a new source of inspiration in the dot-com saga.

Forty-four miles south of San Francisco, the Santa Clara Triton

Museum of Art, is host to "Harvesting Profit: A real space/cyberspace installation" by Los Gatos artist Lisa Dale Miller (<http://www.harvestingprofit.com>).

A ghostlike abandoned orchard symbolizes the way Silicon Valley used to be before it became the center of the high-tech revolution and home to the "virtual e-conomy." Each tree is linked to a monitor displaying video collages of comments Miller gathered from a wide spectrum of observers: Historians of the valley, CEOs of high-profile high-tech companies, former dot-commers, orchard families, frustrated renters, commuters.

When 42-year-old Miller left Japan six years ago to move to Silicon Valley, she experienced a culture shock, but when she came back from a two-month humanitarian mission in Kosovo a year ago, at the crest of e-mania, the place seemed even more ridiculous to her than it had before.

"All the glaring things that had bothered me before, bothered me 10,000 times more, and I just saw the incredible greed that everybody was beginning to really see here. I knew that I wanted to do an interactive piece and have people comment about the changes that had happened over the last 40 years, and certainly over the last 6 years," she says.

While Miller admits having "strong feelings about the commercialization and the mediatization of the Internet, which at this time was one of the most prominent features of the American culture," she says that her objective was to awaken people to the impact of issues that effect everyone who lives in the valley.

Home of the e-conomy, Silicon Valley is also home to greed, crazy real estate prices, congestion and pollution. "You can't go back," she says. "Even if you wanted to put orchards back here, you probably couldn't eat the fruits," she says.

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