

Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Before the laptop came the mainframe. But did computers generate significant new art?

BY CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | ART CRITIC

MAY 6, 2023 8 AM PT



Edward Kienholz, "The Friendly Grey Computer - Star Gauge Model #54," 1965; mixed media (z)

I'm Times art critic **Christopher Knight**, filling in for newsletter regular **Carolina A. Miranda**, who's out sandbagging in preparation for the Sierra snowmelt. As record winter blizzards give way to late-spring thaw, that likely disaster is just now [getting underway](#). With threats of epic flooding predicted in pockets of California, here's what's happening in the arts *avant le déluge*:

The computer-themed “Coded” offers compelling social history without much worthwhile art

Sometime in the late 1970s I did a studio visit at UC San Diego with **Harold Cohen**. Still new to California, I had heard about an artist working with computer programming to make experimental drawings and paintings, and I was curious to see more.

Since corporations and the military were then the primary users of computer technology, while personal computing was years away, the conversation was especially fascinating. I knew little, but British-born Cohen, self-taught in mainframe mysteries, knew a lot. Refining a complex computer program that the university professor invented with which to draw and paint seemed to represent a post-hippie desire: Wrestle the machinery away from the exclusive province of the military-industrial complex and instead put it to creative uses.

The problem: Every example of computer art I saw in the studio was unmemorable.



Harold Cohen, "Labelled Map — Plum, Ochre, Emerald, Silver Grey, and Rust," 1969; oil on canvas (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times)

Cohen, who died at 87 in 2016, wasn't able to produce machine-generated work that was more than rote. Tech seemed a focused way to drain the artist's expressive self from a work of art, the subject of an emotional inner life having been wrung dry by the narrow, droning longevity of Abstract Expressionist painting. But that was a hurdle more inventively overcome by earlier Pop, Minimal and Conceptual strategies.

A few examples of Cohen's work are included in "Coded: Art Enters the Computer Age, 1952–1982," a puzzling and largely inert exhibition currently at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Age has not improved them. A painting that assigned color-shapes according to a computer-coded schema is

torpid, not ingenious. Visiting “Coded” was often like being in his studio all over again, although this time the context of a museum venue had the queasy effect of consecrating the general mediocrity.

To be sure, there is some wonderful art in the exhibition — many by artists well-known (**Donald Judd**, **Edward Kienholz**, **Sol LeWitt**, **Bridget Riley** and more); and some are by artists who are less familiar. Yet, the relationship between computers and these paintings, sculptures and drawings is either reed-thin or, frankly, nonexistent. The theme pursued in “Coded” is pretty much a shambles.

The closing date of 1982 represents the budding emergence of personal computing. The opening date — 1952 — reflects the moment typically identified as the start of digital art. Iowa mathematician **Ben F. Laposky**, then 38, tinkered with a cathode ray oscilloscope to produce black-and-white [photographs](#). Laposky manipulated the amplitude, distortions and other properties of a lab machine’s electronic waveforms to draw luminous linear abstractions that swoop and pirouette across the sheet, their glow emerging from inky darkness. Permanent visual form is given to fleeting electrical voltage in electron beams.

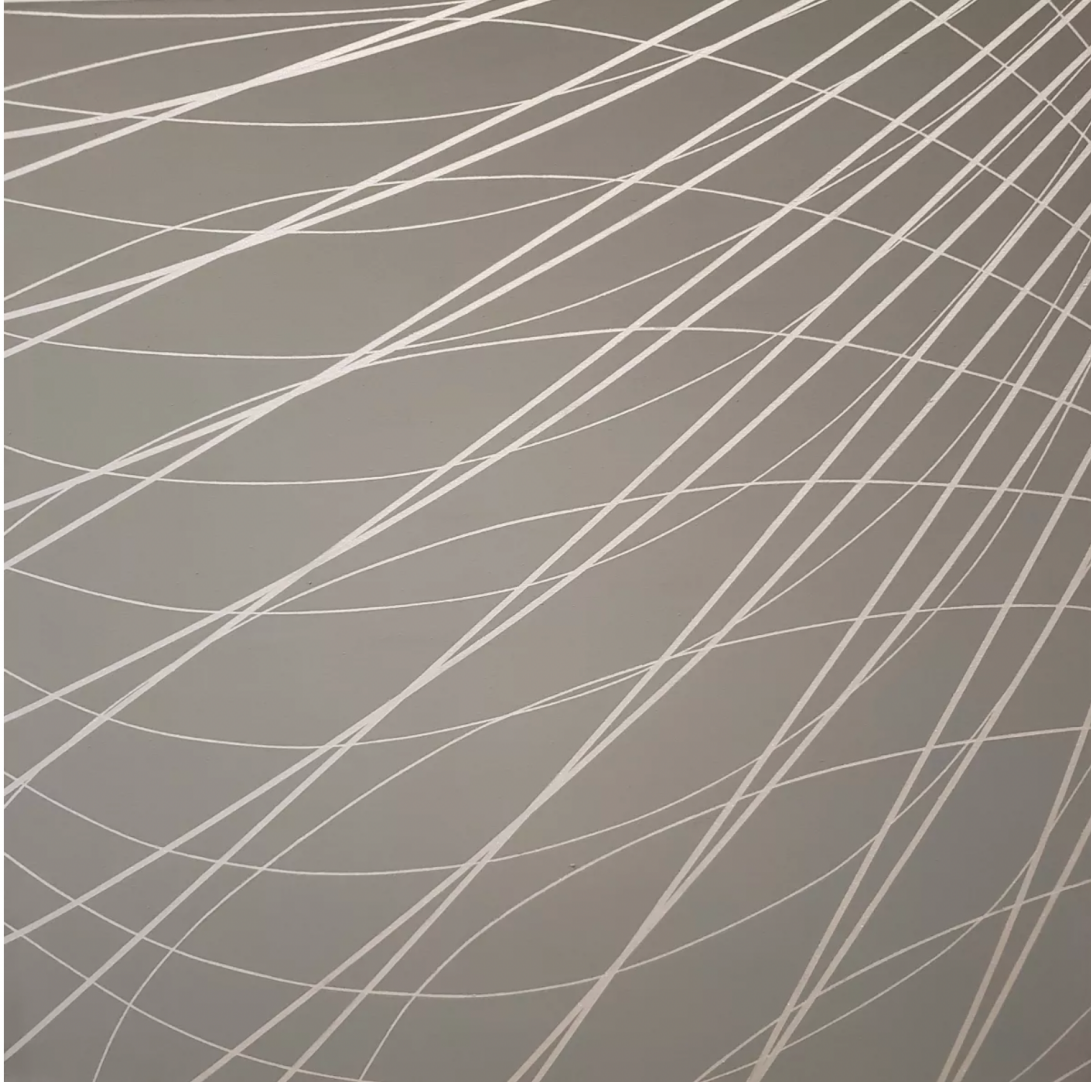
These abstractions can be formally lovely, although Laposky’s repertoire of forms is rather limited. (Resembling a monochrome screensaver on a laptop, they have a “seen one, seem them all” quality.) The exhibition then immediately goes off the rails.

A 1968 abstract painting, four feet square, by Los Angeles artist **June Harwood** (1933-2015) layers curving sets of metallic-silver lines in two different widths against a gray background to create a visually rhythmic, light-reflective network of organic waves. Apparently, we’re meant to think “oscilloscope screen.”

Maybe. Except in the most superficial ways, however, Harwood’s work has roughly zero to do with engaging the emerging computer age.

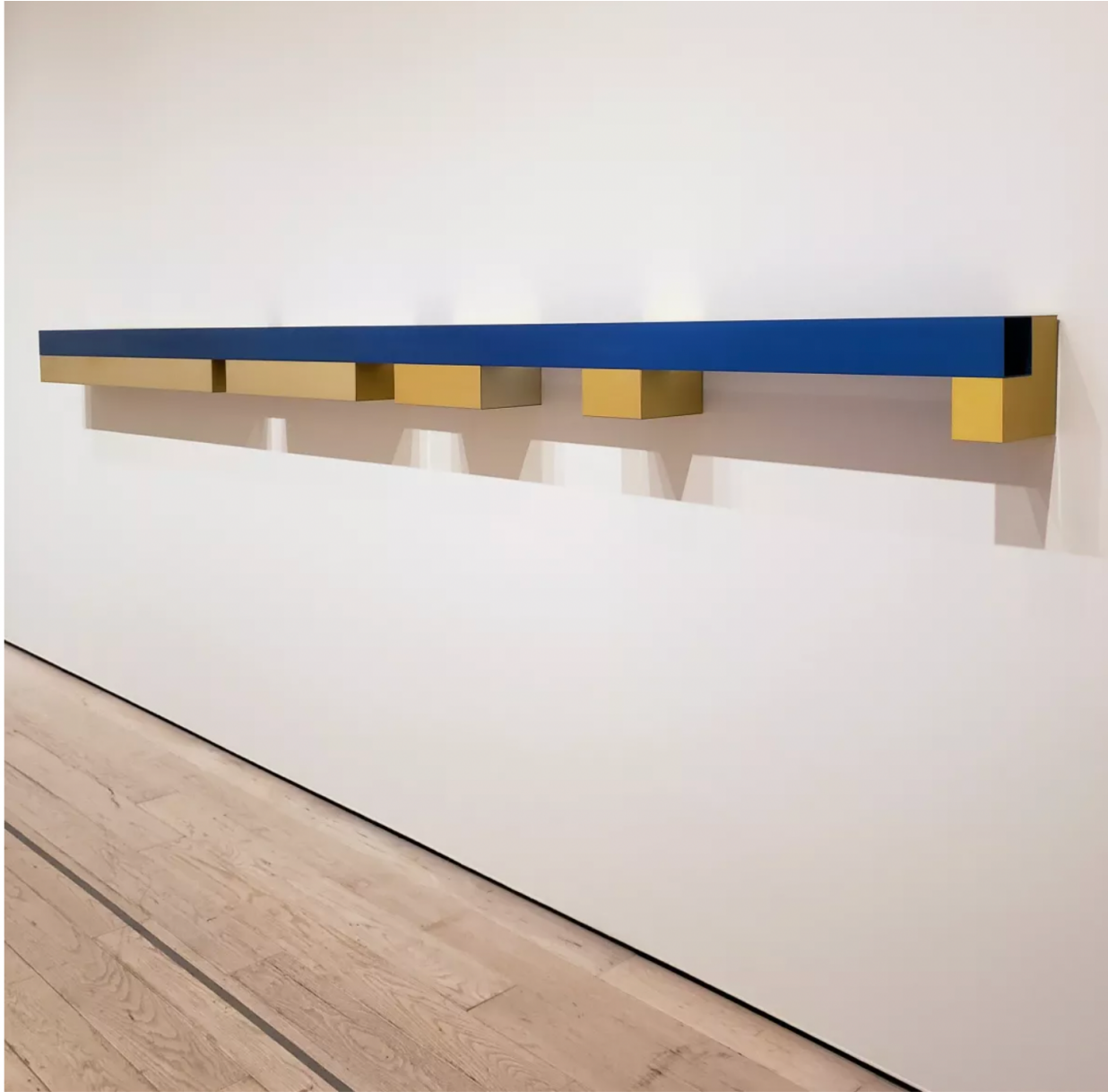
Harwood is not widely known. She was a second-generation Light & Space painter, a talented artist married to **Jules Langsner**, the estimable L.A. critic who coined the term “hard-edge painting” in 1959 for artists like **John McLaughlin** and **Lorser Feitelson**. In her deceptively simple geometric abstractions, she was engaged in achieving complex spatial effects while using only the spare optical properties of composing with flat color.

That “Coded” doesn’t quite know what to make of Harwood’s art is evident from the catalog. Her handsome untitled painting gets a full page reproduction, but not a word is written about it in 272 pages of text featuring 18 otherwise often interesting essays by 14 different authors (including four by LACMA’s prints and drawings specialist Leslie Jones, the show’s curator).



June Harwood, “Untitled, from Network Series,” 1968, acrylic on canvas (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times)

Celebrated British Op [artist Bridget Riley](#), on the other hand, whose parallel bands of rippling color in the marvelous 1964 “Polarity” are based on the curvy pattern of a sine wave, gets extensive catalog consideration. Oddly, we are told at length that scientific data, computation systems and mathematical theory are irrelevant to her work, which is another way of saying Riley’s painting has next to nothing to do with the “Coded” theme either. Nice painting — but why is it here?



Donald Judd, "Wall Progression," 1971, anodized aluminum (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times)

Minimalist artists who used mathematical principles in composition, like Judd and LeWitt, do get included. The arrangement in Judd's 1971 "Wall Progression" sculpture of rectangular, blue and yellow anodized aluminum boxes — and the matching spaces flipped between them — derives from the Fibonacci sequence, in which each digit is the sum of the prior two: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, etc. LeWitt's 1974 sculpture of "Incomplete Open Cubes" compiles all the ways to make a free-standing, three-dimensional form with sides of equal height, width and depth without ever making a complete cube.

What's their relationship to computer coding? Merely that they all use mathematics, apparently. Well, so does the entire history of Western painting that employs the graphic systems of one- and two-point perspective — that choo-choo disappearing down railroad tracks or the building corner thrust toward you. Like Cohen's algorithmic painting, the art of Judd, LeWitt and others labors against visual illusionism, so "Coded" tosses them into the stew.

Ed Kienholz's "The Friendly Grey Computer — Star Gauge Model #54," one of only a few to directly address the digital environment, went straight for biting satire. The 1965 sculpture put a rusty workplace model of computer and some battered desk equipment into a cozy rocking chair, attaching instructions to give the poor overworked office machinery a periodic rest. (Doll-baby feet protrude at the bottom.) The computer age gets similarly overworked as the show's theme.

This is one of those odd exhibitions effectively relaying an interesting social history that frankly produced almost no significant art. (Picasso said that, for art, computers were "useless. They can only give you answers.") Last September, LACMA did something similar with "[The Space Between: The Modern in Korean Art](#)." The critical difference: The Korean show tracked what artists were up to, which made it meaningful, while "Coded" tracks the general culture, then overlays it on art.

Doesn't work. Error404.

LACMA, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 857-6000, through July 2. Closed Wednesday. www.lacma.org

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/newsletter/2023-05-06/essential-arts-newsletter-computers-making-art-lacma-exhibit-essential-arts-arts-culture>