



Photography by John Schlia - Chuck Miller holding his hand-made strips

# Chuck Miller Takes It to the Street: An Installation Worth Staying Up For

by ART HOUSE PRESS

I've long been undecided about street festivals. I sometimes wish they weren't so crowded, but that is the point. I even consider bypassing those oriented to crafts, but then realize I would've missed out on some interesting stuff. And I'm never quite sure I want to expend the energy to secure parking, but that's just me being lazy. Because festivals are always, indisputably worth it.

Case in point: I was recently invited to attend a festival (one that was ablaze in lights, no less!) set to begin about the time I like to wind down for the day. Yet, as visions of freshly-fluffed pillows and silky sheets flitted through my brain, I couldn't shake a feeling akin to *intrigue*. What would I miss if I simply stayed home? A lot, I'd come to find out.

Another admission? I don't put stock in arts reviews which pan or celebrate events I don't attend myself, lest I latch onto a skewed view of what *really* happened at said happening. With that in mind, I offer a brief assessment of "ROC the YOL: A Street Light Festival" before introducing you to an installation I'm glad I stayed up for.

After accepting my friend's invitation and, in fact, attending ROC the YOL – a late-starting, 10pm to 1am homage to light-based technologies and the Int'l. Year of Light held in and around Village Gate on July 17 and 18 – I read a D&C review penned by Jeff Spevak. It recapped the highs and lows of this inaugural light fest but failed to mention one thing: Chuck Miller.

Surely, I thought, Spevak must've taken a wrong turn.

If, on Saturday, he'd travelled east down Anderson (past Good Luck), he'd have come upon a dim parking lot littered with people. If he'd crossed said lot and taken a peek down a lone but cavernous nook between buildings, he would no doubt have been delighted by Chuck's otherworldly light and sound installation, "Out of Sync."

## Why "Out of Sync" Is So Stunning

With the abstract and experimental "Out of Sync," Chuck blends visual and aural elements in real time to transport onlookers far from Neighborhood of the Arts to some mad hot underground club in Europe or upper Scandinavia. Think Berlin. London. Reykjavik.



Photography by John Schlia

The kind you'd only find via word of mouth spread by locals – or by taking an accidental *right* turn.

When what you should've done was turn around and double back 500 yards earlier, if you hoped to retrace your steps to the boutique hotel room you'd booked for the duration of your stay.

The installation is inspired, unfolding in an act of improvisation so striking it stops you dead – mouth agape and eyes transfixed. And that, in fact, is the point. Chuck conceived of and created this work as a computer graphics design project that served as his Visual Communications MFA thesis at RIT. But more on that later.

"More and more," Chuck conceded, while discussing creative talent, artistic merit and credibility with me at Starr Nites Café, "it's about having an audience. If you've got people who are into what you're doing and they get something out of it – and they give you feedback on that – you're *doing* it. And, if people are into what you're doing, just do *more* of it!"

We agreed it's common to devalue skills you can easily tap into.

"You tend to underestimate what other people can get out of what you're doing (and think), 'Well, anybody can do this. Why do they need me to do it? Why do I have to push my sh't on them?' The fact is, no, not everybody can do it and people get enjoyment from it. So, you kind of take it for granted, when it's something you've been doing (out of) enjoyment."

Chuck gets enjoyment from interactive visual performance and design.

"The design is happening live. I'm mixing it live. As you saw (at ROC the YOL), I have all of these (image and sound) clips loaded up. I've been developing that set for, like, months. I'll take some things out and I'll add other things in, but it's always a fresh version because those clips can go together in so many different ways."

That's not even what he enjoys most about his presentations.

"Each frame is sort of like a little painting," he mused.

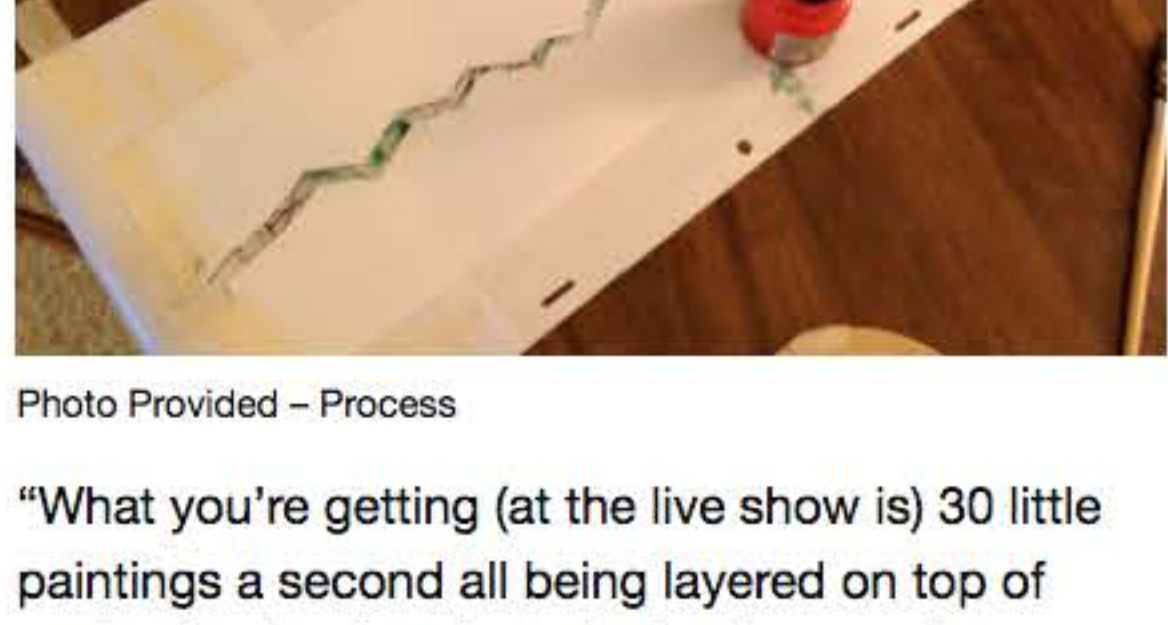


Photo Provided – Process

"What you're getting (at the live show is) 30 little paintings (a second all being layered on top of each other (and projected) simultaneously to create what you see. And it never repeats. It's always something different. I find that very exciting – because it's never going to be the same."

"Like a flipbook!" I chimed in. "A moveable feast for the eyes."

"A feast of painting that moves," Chuck countered.

Well, he would know.

## The Origins of "Out of Sync"

Chuck's process isn't random, by any means. But it is spontaneous.

Spontaneity, it turns out, is a trait he possesses in spades. A month before we met, while listening to public radio, he heard that ROC the YOL's entry deadline had been extended. Hoping to bring his light installation to yet another venue, he sent a proposal to its organizing panel and got in.

"Utilizing abstraction as a language," he wrote, "I'm attempting to present organized sequences that convey structure but leave the viewer to map meaning and experience. Though I think there is great potential in this manner of communication, I've barely scratched the surface. I have presented this (outdoor video projection) project in gallery and studio settings and I would like to explore the effects of scale on the user experience."

What he could've said, more simply, was: "Ya gotta see this!"

But Chuck's too modest for that. In the defense he submitted to RIT, he laid his challenges bare. They included, loosely: How do I create and encourage an emotional response? How can I best combine all of these design elements? How much of the end product should be rendered? Live? How will I manage and control live aspects of the show?

Working through the process, he arrived at solutions. He would hand draw and paint images on film stock. He'd then digitize, curate and arrange them so they could be selected and shuffled on the spot – synced up to a set list he'd create with the same level of thought, care and attention.

Intuition played a role, as well. So did flexibility.

After seeing "Out of Sync" at Imagine RIT, an audience member suggested therapeutic applications – in hospitals or waiting rooms.

"Exploring what happens in people's brains when they look at this stuff could provide useful insight when it comes to making performance choices," he later told me. "As I learn more about what moves people, that may or may not spill back into the content creation process which, for

me, feels naturally personal and introspective." It'd be, to quote Chuck, a "communal" approach to sharing his vision.

"I guess, like any performance, it gets better the more you know about your audience and can speak their brain language. Brain-guage, if you will."

And, yes, he's mastering brain-guage. On the Saturday night I witnessed his performance, I saw Chuck speaking with a young man. The chap boldly approached the mixing board and was hard to miss – a generous smattering of glow stick o-rings affixed to his clothing. I assumed they were friends. Acquaintances. They were neither.

The young boy simply walked up and asked Chuck what he was doing. The artist turned the question around, asking what he thought he was doing. The o-ring-festooned fellow gazed at "Out of Sync" in projection and said, "It looks like abstract art and cartoons got together and had a love child."

"That freaking comment made my night." How could it not?



Photography by John Schlia – Chuck Miller

Chuck's a bona fide art-and-computer geek who majored in Fine Art at MCC, Media Studies at SUNY Buffalo and Computer Graphics at RIT – where he now teaches Graphic Design, as an adjunct, when he's not teaching Interactive Design at Bryant & Stratton College.

## The Inner Workings of "Out of Sync"

"Out of Sync" combines live projection and design in a way that appears seamless.

But the task of blending design and technology, Chuck attests, is anything but. Knowing Chuck was keen on projection, Chris Jackson (director of RIT's Visual Communication Design MFA program) guided him to the finished project by suggesting he find a way to blend core graphic design elements in real time.

The result is what Chuck's dubbed a "late-night, avant-garde, drive-in" theatre effect. While those elements work well on their own, what would happen when he brought them together? That's where performance came into play. The tricky part would be executing it. He wanted to create separate clips or images which integrated line, color and shape. But how?

"Do I make them very computer graphic-y? Do I use Illustrator to make very vector-y shapes? I did a lot of that and just wasn't happy with the outcome. It looked so generic (and) mechanical."

His ultimate muse was EDM, or Electronic Dance Music, concert performance.

"(There are) a lot of visual at these shows," he said, "and they're *huge*, right? They're as much a part of the show as the music is. I wanted to kind of think on that scale, but (bring) it down to something more human. More personal. I just wasn't getting that."

While studying in Buffalo, he'd done some drawing on film – 16 mm film – and thought that might offer an answer.

But film stock is expensive and reusing that old film (which he kept at his parents' place) seemed lazy. Yet, that was the look he was going for: handmade, personal, abstract. Instead, he bought "giant pieces of acetate" at an art supply store, sliced it into strips and applied line, color and shape.

As we sat at a café table, Chuck reached into a messenger bag and pulled out a fistful of strips.

"This," he said, holding up a glorious bunch of hand-painted film, "really satisfied, for me, what I was looking for in terms of the texture and feeling of the artwork."

As for process, he'd run the acetate thru a scanner in chunks and replicate the look of projected film by stitching the clips together into 1280-by-300,000-pixel-sized files using Adobe Photoshop. (It tops out at 300,000.) He'd then transfer those to After Effects and animate them so it looked as if they were moving past a 1280-by-720 window at various speeds and angles, creating a sense of motion.

"The clips (were) anywhere from 12 to 24 seconds each," he noted.

He'd use Resolume Arena AV performance software to load the clips in layers, managing mix and effects from an Akai MPC40 control surface (designed to run Ableton Live digital audio software) and mixing in other, digital audio and effects tracks using Ableton Live via a Korg NanoKontrol. Arena, he said, is "an artist go-to" – a staple among VJs and visual artists wanting to trigger, layer, blend, mix and fade video clips and map controllers to video software functions.

This allowed him to play five or more clips at once.

The result mimicked the look of five projectors running in sync and offered a wide array of audio/visual possibilities. Since Chuck had preloaded 40-plus individual clips, he could literally run the live show this way until his laptop started smoking. Or until smoke came out of his ears, whichever happened first. The system stuttered a bit, Chuck said, but I wouldn't have known it.

"I was pushing it a little too much."

Computers, it turns out, can only read so much data off a hard drive at any given time. Graphics card size plays a large role in the outcome and laptops are equipped with a fixed version. But Chuck had also equipped his MacBook with a switchable graphics card that kicked in whenever his laptop was in danger of experiencing an overload. This kept things running smoothly.

"The main thing is the codec you're using to encode the video clips."

QuickTime, he said, can be extended to encode or decode video files in myriad ways for better movie quality/file size balance. With 1024-by-720 pixel images leaving his MacBook and running thru a projector onto an outside wall at 1024-by-768 pixels, Chuck used Resolume's DXV codec to optimize playback in Arena – loading multiple clips and rendering them quickly.

## Chuck Miller's Street Cred

If nothing else, "Out of Sync" gave Chuck Miller and ROC the YOL the street cred they deserve.

"It's definitely akin to abstract film/avant-garde film, in terms of the material," Chuck explained of his medium. "But, instead of it being something that's been put together and then you're just watching the result, it's something that happens in front of you. And that's the attraction for me."

Improvisation is "100 percent of the attraction," he added, noting how invigorating it is to respond to environmental factors in real time. After all, preparing and loading material is one thing. Performing is another. It's live. Responsive. Backed by drum beats and rhythm tracks.

"My struggle with this, from the beginning, has been how much (I'd) do in advance and how much (I'd) do on the spot. I wanted everything to be spontaneous. There are plug-ins you can use that will generate shapes and lines and respond to sound. So, I had to figure out, 'Where do I want to draw the line?'"

A trip to MoMA provided the answer. While perusing the museum's upper floors, which house abstract art he's long admired, Chuck was struck by a sense of intimacy. Van Gogh. Miro. Visible paint strokes. Canvas width. Board thickness. Texture. Imagery. It all looked so fresh in person.

"It was like I was *there* with the artists."

Intimacy, albeit on a larger scale, was what he craved in his own work.

"What I'm doing is nothing amazing (in terms of technique). It's more about the process or the creation of the original clips and then bringing those together. That's the artwork. It's like live painting, in a way. (Maybe that's) the unique part of it."

## Find out what makes "Out of Sync" a unique, painterly feast at ChuckMillerDesign.com.

Chuck Miller's "Out of Sync" formed one half of a two-act performance installation (aka ROC the YOL Experience 1 of 5) which included work by Maria Schweppe, RIT professor and 3D Digital Graphics/Design program chair.

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