

obituary

# Jerry Pethick\*

(1935–2003)

**Artist, holographer, and inventor of the sand table as a way to make holograms**

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***About the author***

Rebecca first saw holograms at an art gallery in 1970 while completing an Art supervision degree. In 1988, she received the Shearwater Foundation Art Holography Award. In 1995 with partner Fred Unterseher, she co-founded Zone Holografix Studios, an art and teaching studio with a pulse laser lab. She continues to exhibit artwork, teach and write for electronic and print publications.

Jerry Pethick, known to many as a sculptor and multimedia artist, succumbed to brain cancer at his home on Hornby Island in July of 2003. For the homegrown holographer he will forever hold a place of honor as the originator of the “sand table”. In 1969 he received a U.S. Patent for his “Sand-based stability system for Holography”. He was a founder with Lloyd Cross of the San Francisco School of Holography, the first institution to offer independent workshop courses to the public. The sand table was born of necessity as an integral part of creating holograms in the school setting. In addition he played an instrumental part in mounting and showing very early holographic artwork in some of the first notable holography exhibitions.

Curator *Annette Hurtig* described Pethick’s art career in this way:

Jerry Pethick began making art in the late 1950s. His early artwork was sculptural, and he is often still referred to as a sculptor. But Pethick’s interests and pursuits extend well beyond the confines of any single category or discipline. From the beginning he pursued several related avenues of research, investigating optical physics, for example, and theories of visual perception. As well as making art, he contributed to the development of, and knowledge about, visual imaging technologies. Indeed, Jerry Pethick’s scientific and epistemological inquiries are inseparable from his artistic activities.

Throughout the holography community his students and fellow artists remember him as a unique character. Fred Unterseher, a seasoned holographer in his own right was a sculpture student of Pethick’s at the San Francisco Art Institute. He remembers being among the small group waiting with Pethick for the arrival of Lloyd Cross in the Bay area. Soon after Lloyd’s arrival they banded together to form the San Francisco School of Holography.

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\*deceased July 7, 2003

Pethick was certainly an innovative artist. His enthusiasm for problem solving in novel ways was infectious. One of the first flyers to announce courses at the school was created using a child's discarded vacuum forming machine, Jerry found. He used clear butyrate plastic for the flyers, silk-screened the graphics and vacuum formed 3D spacemen into the plastic. They were eye catchers and were all gone by the end of the same day they were posted. The on going physical construction of the school itself was always an enormous challenge, considering there was often no ready cash and at the first site no running water. Jerry and Lloyd together were unstoppable; in true bootstrap fashion they devised one invention after the next to meet the confrontations. Their solutions were not only clever but also improved upon from one location to the next. Function was foremost so "thinking outside the box" was always the order of the day. To separate sand table studios they devised curved interior walls out of 1/4 inch particle wood panels and black plastic sheet covered the ceilings to control ambient light (this innovation migrated to the New York School of Holography along with the sand table). Even the legal fees for the formation of the school were bartered, in exchange for painting the lawyer's office. Jerry had a passion for problem solving with such creative and innovative flare that he seemed to be "in the "flow" perpetually.

Although he is largely unknown to many holographers, he has touched their lives and he continues to, through the numerous proponents and publications that have advocated the spirit of homegrown holography and the use of the sand table.

Artist Margaret Benyon met Jerry early in her career, she shared her remembrance in the following statement.

It saddened me to hear the news that Jerry had died last year. He rang me from the Chelsea Arts Club the last time he was in London, and if I'd known it would be for the last time I would have made certain that I got to see him. We met only about three or four times a long time ago, but we kept in touch with each other all our lives. His obituary published in the Toronto Globe and Mail was absolutely spot-on. To me he was such a big, wild, warm-hearted, shambolic, generous spirit and that rare thing, a real artist.

Thinking back to when we first met, it must have been at around the time that we graduated from art school in London in 1964: myself from the Slade School, and Jerry from the Royal College of Art in London. I visited the Walmer Road studio that he shared with Ed Pickett, who told me that the staff at the RCA had difficulty deciding whether he was a genius or an idiot. He came to the opening of my first show in Nottingham in 1969. I remember he told me that it was the world's first solo exhibition of holograms by an artist, and got very excited about it, in fact so excited that he got thrown out of the pub afterwards. He had formed Editions Inc with Lloyd Cross in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the first

gallery of holography, and in 1970 they organized an exhibition at the Cranbrook Academy, and at the Finch College Museum in New York, in which I was able to take part simply by mailing a hologram.

I have an etched diffraction grating of his, one of the most interesting individual uses of embossing that I've seen—a crude, blotchy, blobby drawing of the lighthouse on Hornby Island where he lived, as seen through a window. It looks like a monoprint, as if he'd printed onto a piece of clear thin transparent film in rainbow ink: the areas of the drawing remained as diffraction grating, and the rest of it was etched clear and see-through. Such work was consistent with his larger explorations of virtual and material space using lenticulars, fly's eye lenses, and a great number of recycled materials. His sand-table invention was entirely consistent with the use of scrap materials in his art work. Jerry did not make many holograms that he exhibited as art: the huge list of works in his *Marking Time* CD produced in 1998 in collaboration with Peter van Riper lists only two works\* using holography. However, he will be remembered for the part he played in the history of holography through his sand-table invention and at the San Francisco School of Holography, and by those who knew him for his larger-than-life personality.

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We extend our condolences to his wife Margaret and son Yana who survive him.

\***Going Away at Home** (1970/71) which includes 13 holograms on film, and **Spaceman** (1974).