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Illuminating edge to "lobby art" at Seattle City Light

By **Gayle Clemans**
Special to The Seattle Times

The term "lobby art" can be an insult. It suggests the kind of blandly acceptable, nonthreatening art that administrators and designers seem to think is required in public lobbies.

A semiabstract bronze sculpture or some pastel still-life paintings might fit the bill, but certainly not tricky conceptual art or wacky new media work.

However, the seven artists who created new art for Seattle City Light have done lobby art proud.

On the most basic level, these works should generate the kind of wide appeal lobby art is meant to have: They're visually pleasing and not overtly political or bombastic.

And then they go above and beyond: Most of the works are more than visually pleasing; they're downright stimulating and at times mesmerizing.

Although each of the seven lobbies of the City Light offices displays work by a single artist, it's fun to think about the whole group as a vertical exhibition, stacked up on floors 28-30 and 33-36.

The works of art explore different ideas about light, systems and community, and offer a variety of media from painting to video to porcelain casts of light bulbs.

You can ride the elevators of the Seattle Municipal Tower (formerly known as Key Tower), stopping on each of the seven floors to see the art. Be sure to jot down the floor numbers before you go, because it's a bit confusing.

As the second-tallest building in Seattle, the Municipal Tower has a complex system of elevators. You'll need to ride up and down two different elevator banks to see all seven sets of works.

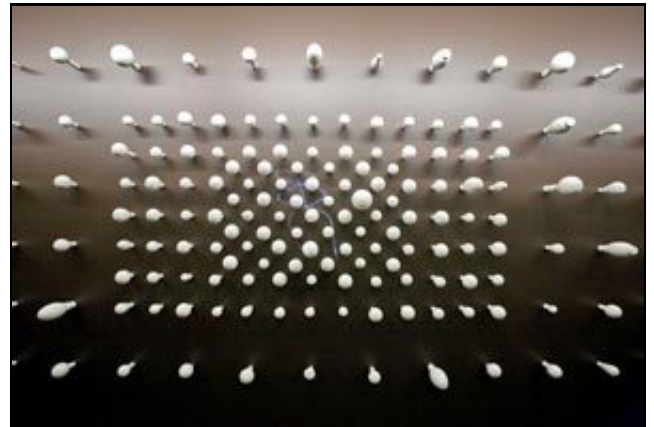
In theory, you don't even need to get out of the elevators to peek out and see each artist's contribution, but you should.

The best of the work deserves time, spent looking at and thinking about how the artist approached the goal of the commission: to "enhance the workplace of the Seattle City Light employees as well as draw attention to the utility's mission."



SPIKE MAFFORD

Marie Watt's "Energy: Our Heirloom," a large-scale, multipaneled work of embroidery, wool and silk touches on the history and future of City Light.



SPIKE MAFFORD

Yuki Nakamura's "Filament" greets visitors to the 30th floor of the Seattle Municipal Tower.

Exhibition review **"Seattle City Light Elevator Lobby Artworks"**

Newly commissioned art for the Seattle City Light offices, 7 a.m.-6 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. Floors 28, 29, 30, 33, 34, 35, 36 of the Seattle Municipal Tower, 700 Fifth Ave., Seattle (206-684-7171 or arts.culture@seattle.gov).

According to curator Deborah Paine, who oversaw the complicated process of nomination and selection, the artists were not asked to directly relate their work to City Light, but some did.

One of the most direct references comes in Marie Watt's "Energy: Our Heirloom," a large-scale, multipaneled work of embroidery, wool and silk that touches on the history and future of City Light.

A cameo portrait of J.D. Ross, the "Father of City Light," anchors one side of the work while windmill blades swirl across the other side like little boomerangs.

At first, the embroidered fabric narrative seemed a little too country-fair-craftsy, but then I welcomed the contrast between the traditional, familial technique and materials and the high-tech machinations of providing electricity to a huge urban area.

Emily Ginsburg also explores notions of systems and energy in "Currents," a work that covers the entire wall with whimsical diagrams painted in black on white aluminum panels.

The schematic drawings seem to follow paths of electricity from source to output. But along the way, all kinds of surreal images sprout from the linear plot: ladders, plants, a chandelier, blobby heads or speech-bubbles, all becoming interconnected through line or composition.

The ideas of generating energy and productivity become very abstract and playful in Ginsburg's hand.

Other works are less directly suggestive of issues surrounding electricity. Kerry Skarbakka's "The Elements of Attraction" greets you with a humming soundtrack and slowly moving imagery that plays out across five screens.

Although a couple of City Light employees I talked with were less than thrilled with some of the images — such as a man in a suit floating under water — I was captivated by Skarbakka's meditative exploration of the elements of air, fire, water and earth.

The aerial shots of golden-lit forests and rivulets that unfold across the five screens are an interesting take on the kind of landscape art you might more typically find in a lobby.

Claude Zervas' framed light sculptures, "Diatomoton 7, 8, 9," are also at their best after some time spent with them.

Zervas has used custom electronics and programming to create biomorphic images that gently undulate within their frames. Their occasional quivering spasms are delightfully surprising and almost make you think you're observing actual life-forms, glowing and magnified.

Least interesting were Victoria Haven's cut steel and aluminum wall sculptures that present gridlike forms in slick blue, silver and white. While they are meant to resonate with both electrical systems and geographical features, they seemed too cold and self-contained to breed further associations.

But, taken as a whole, the works are a brilliant example of how the One Percent for Art funds, which uses 1 percent of the money spent on building projects to buy art, can be used to commission sophisticated new work from talented artists.

The effective and inspiring use of funds generated out of a much-debated policy is an important thing to consider as we embark on a new year.