

Mary Mary

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In the darkness of the main gallery at Dundee Contemporary Arts there is the whirr of projector fans, a faint mechanical voice seeping through from another room, a startling whoosh of noisy ventilation and then... sheer magic.

A spotlight lands on a pianola in the centre of the room and there is real snow falling on to the ebony and ivory keyboard. As it lands gently and wetly on the keys and the surrounding gallery floor, for a moment the player piano comes alive. The flakes seem to play a tinkling keyboard tune and then, just as suddenly, everything stops. It is still and silent and dark once more.

It's tempting to see all this – the centrepiece of a marvellous exhibition featuring dozens of gadgets and gizmos by one of the country's most admired but most elusive artists – as so much trickery.

But in a show that is timed to chime with the city's Discovery Film Festival, Glasgow artist Torsten Lauschmann has created a poetical, magical landscape that illuminates our relationship with machines, especially when it comes to the magic of the moving image.

Lauschmann, who trained in Germany and at Glasgow School of Art, has always resisted categories. He makes films and music, programs computers, and has a DJ persona (Slender Whiteman, who tours with a solar-powered laptop). A recipient of the inaugural Margaret Tait Film Award last year, he has shown persistent interest in early moving image technologies: zoetropes, thaumatropes, magic lantern shows and the camera obscura. He dabbles in digital technology but often combines it with the homemade.

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Above all he is interested in illusions and why we want to believe in them.

At DCA, one wall of the gallery has been painted with luminous paint and a rotating lamp "draws" on its blank surfaces. The lines coalesce on the surface, then fade, like distant, dying stars, creating a three-dimensional space out of a two-dimensional one, an illusion of the universe but compelling nonetheless.

Next door in a small ancillary gallery Lauschmann has remade his House Of The Rising Sun, an exquisite animation of a vast hilltop mansion lit from within by sunlight. The sun rises and falls casting light on to a panoramic landscape painted onto the surrounding walls, a wonderful visual trick, but also surely a wonderfully romantic metaphor for inner light.

Indeed, it is hard not to see in Lauschmann's assembled technologies – from slide show to mirror ball, animation to digital projection – a recurring invocation of human intelligence and even, to use an old-fashioned word, the soul.

From the image of the lens which appears in many of his works, to the glowing lamps, orbs and balls of light that recur in this show, I am reminded of the history of genre painting, when a burning candle might symbolise the human spirit, or a sunrise or sunset the human lifespan.

To visit Lauschmann in his own studio is to step through a tangle of wires and cables. You might sit among teetering piles of well-thumbed books, topped by a laptop, encounter a houseplant or two, and a whole host of kit that might only be recognisable to modern computer programmers or Victorian magic lantern enthusiasts.

In this show, a cluster of audio adapters and cables hangs from the ceiling like a post-modern chandelier. At the centre of it burns a single lamp. This is a self-portrait, the tangle of wires a neural metaphor, as well as a clear statement on the entanglement of man and machine.

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Years ago, Lauschmann and the artist Michael Wilkinson trained a computer to recite Oasis's Wonderwall. When its tinny voice bleated, "Maybe, you're going to be the one that saves me," you suddenly felt how hopeless, how sad it must be to be a machine.

At DCA he has voiced a digital projector. It sits gazing out the window, pleading for escape, longing to turn its head 360 degrees. "I am tired," it moans. "I want to show what's behind and above. I want to stand tall, look at it."

Sitting on the top of Lauschmann's snowbound pianola is a toy ape. In the face of modern technology, with its risks and benefits, we must try to decide whether we are organ grinder or monkey. But the little fellow begs a much deeper question, about what drives us: the mind or the body, the head or the heart?

Is it nature or culture that sees an artist like Lauschmann spend his life tinkering with stuff that other people might regard as toys? The latest complex processing tools have enabled computer programmer Eddie Lee to build an algorithmic pattern for a new film, *Father's Monocle*, in which digits ebb and flow in a way that reflects the flocking patterns of starlings or sheep.

Indeed, in a world that tends to see the implications of technology as turning us into free flying birds or dumb sheep, Lauschmann is an artist who refuses to buy into either version. All becomes apparent in Lauschmann's keynote film, *Misshapen Pearl*, first shown in 2003. This haunting adaptation of the ideas of the philosopher Vilém Flusser still stands up nearly a decade down the line.

The story of a simple street lamp is the excuse for a meditation on consumerism, 24-hour culture, night work and man's relationship with technology. Melancholic, romantic, yet optimistic and somehow thrillingly human, Lauschmann's work casts unexpected light on the fundamentals.