Is computer-generated art a valid form?

This isn't going to happen very often, if at all, but Sketchbook takes a different form today. We have to talk. Computer artists buckle up. This could be a bumpy ride. See, I'm one of those art writers who questions computer art as a fine art, and it seems to be everywhere these days.

To be fair, I'm including the views of a computer artist, Nikitas Kavoukles. His artworks, which go on view at Sarasota's JABU Center this month, are heralded as "rich, painterly images that are based on photographs. . . ."

The following is part of an exchange we had. I've had to condense our views in the interest of space. But I made sure to give Kavoukles the last word.

"So much computer art is meant to look like painting, why go to the bother of electronically generating images that look as if they were painted by hand. I ask this of you particularly because you speak of your classical training in painting. I have the same concern when photo-real painting tries to look like a color slide. Why should something look like something else when the real thing is readily available?

"Mind you, I believe artists should be able to make art out of anything they want. But to make art out of pixels that look like art made out of paint seems pointless.

Nikitas Kavoukles: "Actually, my work is not intended to look like a painting, which is why I leave in the pixilation that is usually found in digital images. . . . The final images look as painterly as they do because it just happens to be my working style. . . . My work in this series is not computer art in the strict sense, as it is not the computer that creates it. There are software programs that can generate certain types of images automatically, but I don't use anything of the sort. I have to manipulate all the controls manually to achieve the desired result. Just as we do not say "the brush painted the picture" — rather, we say "the artist did it" — so in this case the artist manipulates the computer's software and hardware to create a picture. . . .

PHOTO PROVIDED

"Blue Palm I" by Nick Kavoukles. His work is on display this month at Sarasota's JABU Center.

"Also, in this series, the camera and computer are my brushes. I am the creative consciousness; the style comes from me. Pixels are simply part of the chemistry of the medium, just like the linseed oil in a painter's medium, or the color pigments in the paint. . . . And to clarify — I'm not making art out of pixels; I'm making art out of inks."

I've heard it argued that it doesn't matter if art comes in cyber form, as long as it's good art. But it matters, I think. For one thing, cyberspace images are a kind of virtual art. They have no physical existence until they're printed — machine-printed, no less. Where does computer art with its countless inkjet prints leave the coveted one-of-a-kind variety?"

"Despite the beauty of a good one-of-a-kind work of art, there is also the sad aspect that it is just that: one-of-a-kind. I have spoken with many art lovers from all walks of life. The most common complaint I have heard is their lament that they cannot afford to own genuine artwork."

Joan Altabe

Sketchbook

Granted, artists have always taken lifeless matter, like clay, and transformed it into living form. And it may be said that to computer artists, circuitry is their clay. I also concede that electronic technology gets art out of its traditional spaces. But when I remember that computer art is machine-made, it throws the image out of the world of illusion into the real world, a world run by machines. And in a programmable instant, I see the computer image muscling in on humankind's strongest suit these days — the handmade one-of-a-kind."

"The digital process does, however, occupy a position on a continuum with the processes of painting and printmaking. It's simply a development. . . . Digital prints are a recent incarnation of visual art; and digital work offers a view of the world that is unique to the medium.

"For me, the computer now (for who knows what will come next?) is an extension of the physical brain, and the virtual aspects of computerized painting are simply new tools to explore. For isn't creativity virtual? Everything that humanity has manifested on the physical plane has had its origin in the mind, has it not?"

On exhibit: Nikitas Kavoukles, "Beneath the Surface," an exhibit to benefit the Crowley Museum, 1915 Ivanhoe St., Sarasota, Feb. 16-March 3. Hours: Noon-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Saturday-Sunday. Information: 322-1000.

Joan Altabe, *a local writer and arts and architecture expert, appears Thursdays in the Herald. She can be reached at jaltabe2@msn.com*