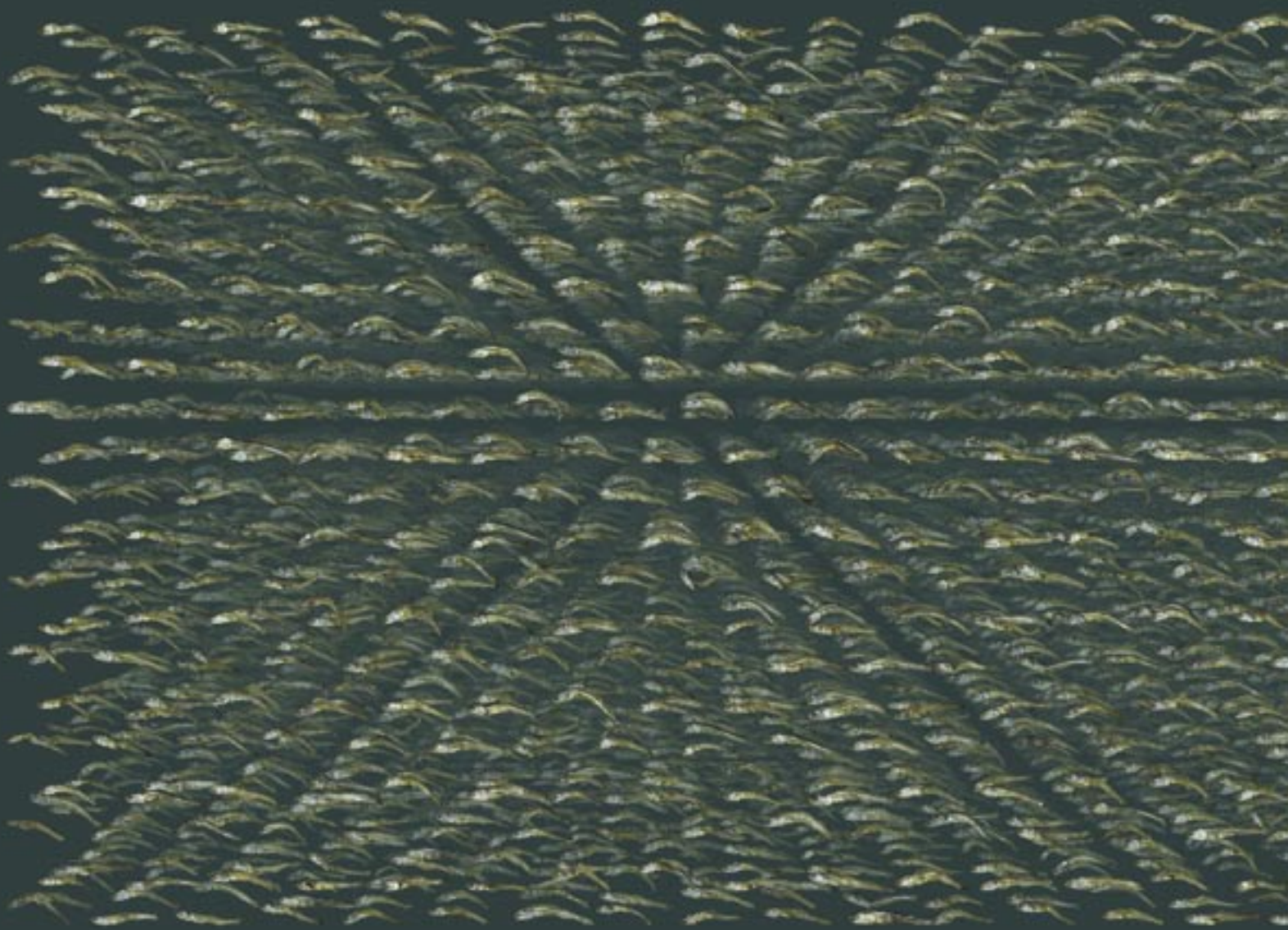
CRISTINEROSE
JOSEE BIENVENU
gallery

JOHN MAEDA

"F00D"

DECEMBER 7, 2002 - JANUARY 18, 2003



Getting it about John Maeda
By Claudia Dreifus

Claudia Dreifus does interviews about science for the New York Times. Her latest book, which includes an interview with John Maeda, is "Scientific Conversations: Interviews On Science From the New York Times." New York: Henry Holt, 2001.

LEFT Excerpt from "Rebirth"/30x20-inch Cibachrome Print
ABOVE John Maeda creating "Butterfries"
COVER Excerpt from "Traffic"/30x20-inch Cibachrome Print with parts from "Butterfries"/30x30-inch Cibachrome Print

On a summer morning in 1999, my editor at the *New York Times'* science section, Cornelia Dean, came to me with an idea: "I'd like you to go up to MIT and do one of your conversations with John Maeda. He's a computer artist."

"Computer art," I hesitated. "I don't really understand it and I don't like it all that much. What would I talk to him about?"

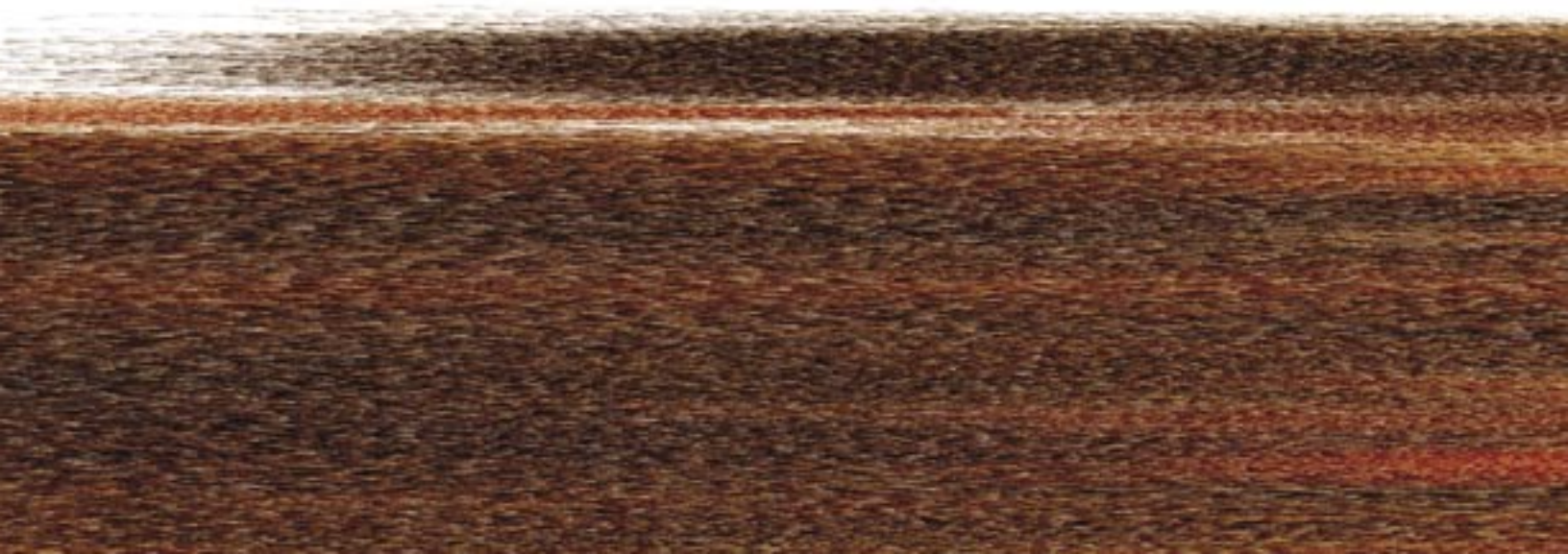
"Just ask him his life story," she returned. "The art will follow."

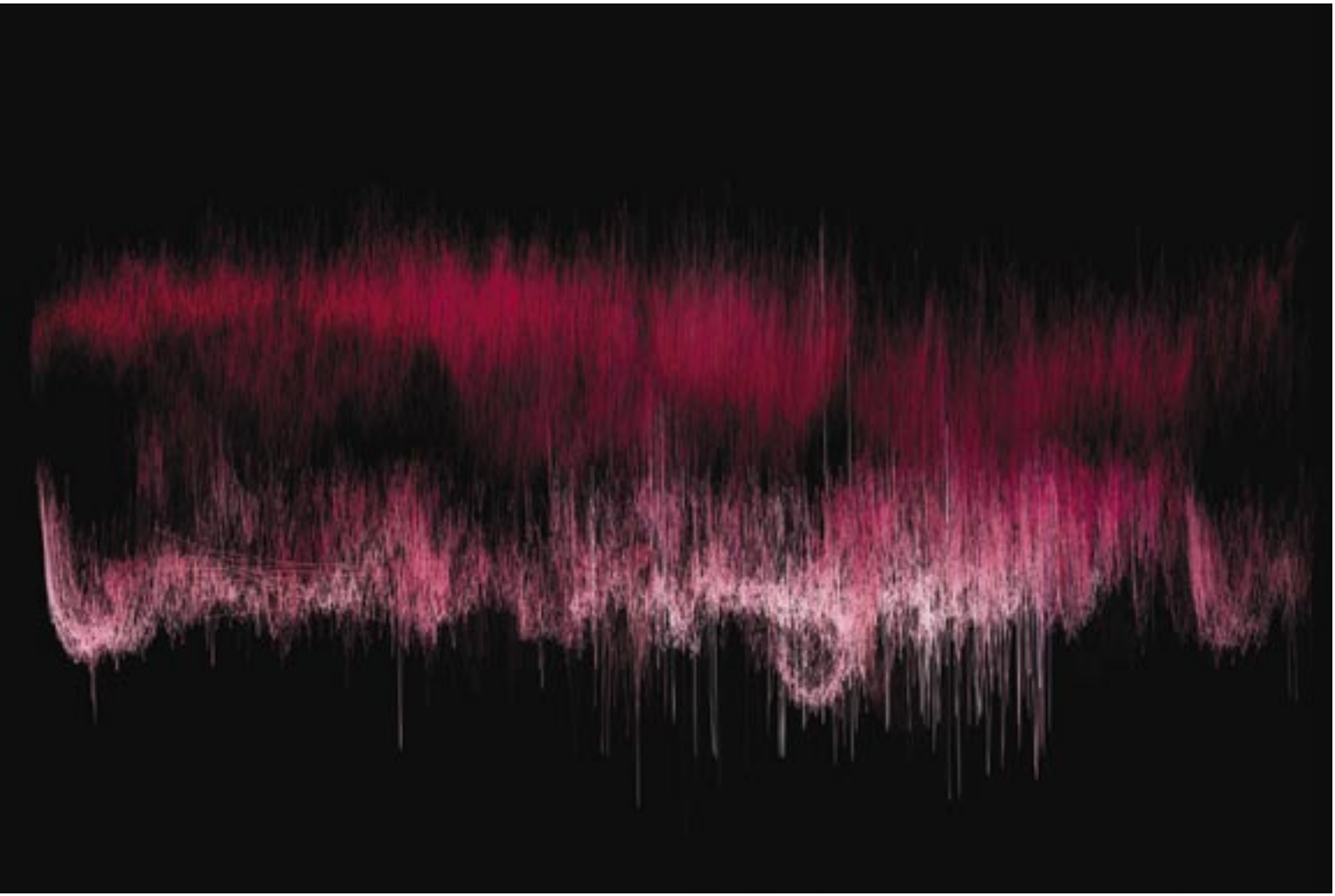
And so I journeyed to Cambridge to meet this sweet, funny man who labored all day in the darkened cave that is the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Laboratory. And Cory was absolutely right. The very instant I turned on my tape recorder, one could see that Maeda's art flowed directly from his narrative.

This artist was the son of hardworking Japanese immigrants who labored for sixteen-hour days in their Seattle tofu factory. As a child, John showed both artistic and mathematical talents. But his father dismissed the art as "frivolous." At eighteen, John went off to MIT, a secret artist, studying to enter the most practical of all the professions—engineering.

Then, in the 1980s, the computational revolution went wide and suddenly there was a place for an engineer who was also an artist. Using his computer as a paintbrush and his programs as pigment, Maeda made a reputation creating interesting kinetic pieces that he placed, free of charge, on the Internet. Honors and prizes began coming his way. He won the Japan Multimedia Grand Prize, the New York Art Directors Gold Prize, the American National Design Award. There were advertising commissions from Absolut Vodka, Sony and Shiseido. *Esquire Magazine* embarrassed him by naming Maeda as one of the "21 Most Important People of the 21st Century." "I believe there is room in this world for a humanist technologist," Maeda told me.

That morning—as we spoke of technology, art and personal values, I was converted to the ideas of this humanist/technologist/designer/programmer. I think I was able to respond to his work because he was using technology in such a highly accessible way. If previous computer art, I felt, had been cold and alienating, he made pieces that melted the heart, made a viewer think—and smile. One couldn't help but connect to his work in the same way one responded to good folk art or the mobiles of Alexander Calder or even Lego blocks; there was something simple about them that reached you without too much intellectualizing. "I like to make things my children can enjoy," he told me—a statement key to understanding John Maeda's art.





LEFT "GreenZucchini," "BluePurpleTopTurnip," "RedBeet" from the "Smoothies" Series/11x12.5-inch Plexi-Sandwich Mounted Cibachrome Prints
"Amazon" with detail inset from the "Wet Condiments" Series/6x48-inch Plexi-Sandwich Mounted Cibachrome Print
ABOVE "Fat-Free"/30x20-inch Cibachrome Print

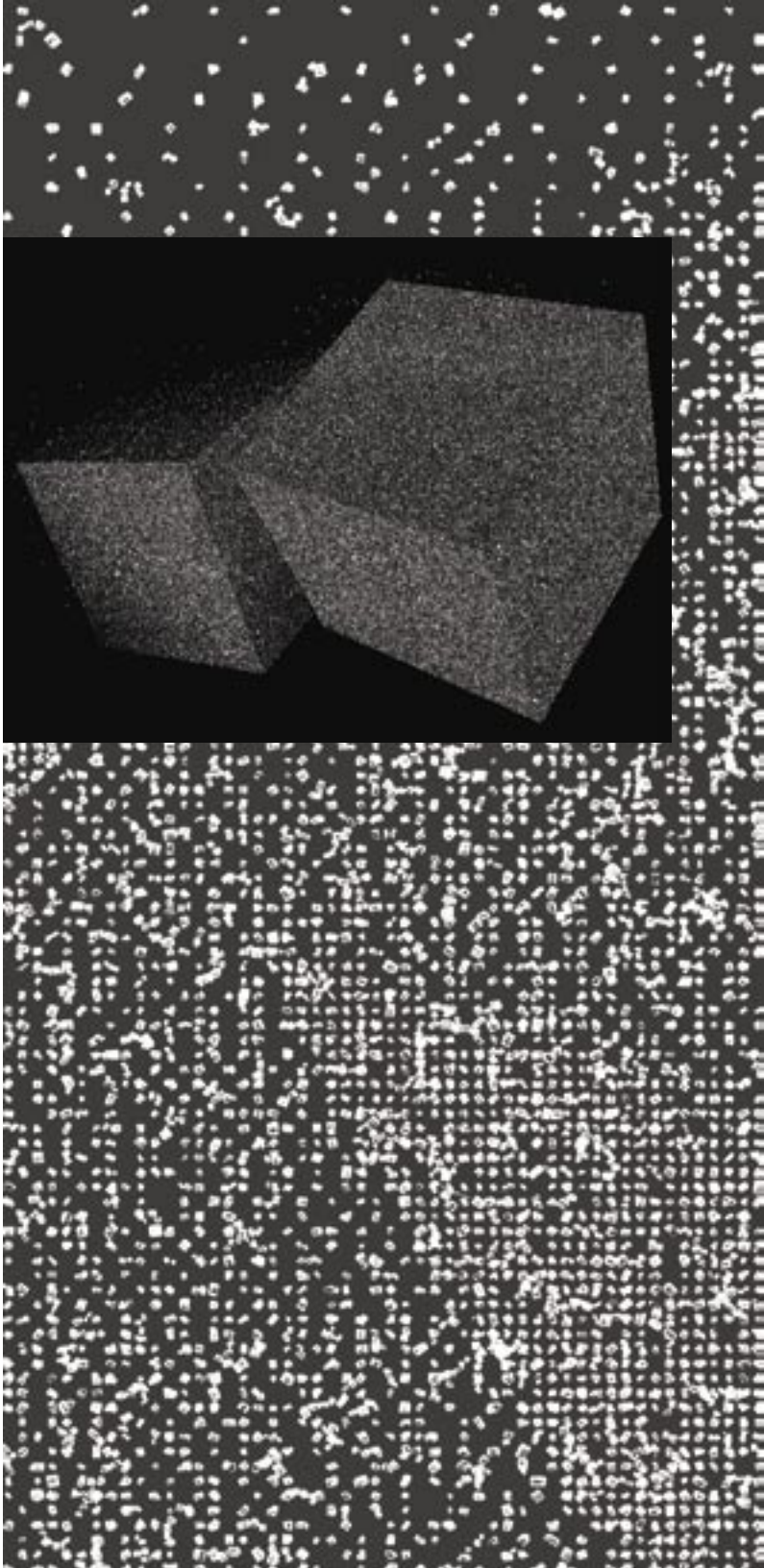
The Q and A that John Maeda and I created that day is one of the best I've done in my many years as an interviewer. Gallery owner Mariacristina Parravicini read it in the *New York Times* and phoned Maeda at MIT, offering him a New York show.

A year later, in November of 2000, this gallery—the Cristinerose Gallery—presented John Maeda's "Post Digital," a collection of sculptural pieces that used customized Palm Pilots to show us how computers can change the way we look at very ordinary objects—like fruits and vegetables. Engineer John Maeda programmed the little handhelds himself so that they would produce the exact images that Artist John Maeda was looking for.

The new Maeda show at the Cristinerose/Josee Bienvenu Gallery, "F00D," is, at once, a further exploration of John's interest in the things we eat, homage to some of the greats of 20th Century American modern art, and an experiment with new electronics tools—in this case, those ubiquitous digital cameras and an ordinary home-office scanner. One also can't help but wonder if the theme isn't in some way a tribute to his father's work as a tofu craftsman. After decades of traveling the globe and receiving the world's honors, John Maeda returns to the raw material of life, which is, of course, f00d.

In the new collection, the viewer is likely to recognize echoes of Andy Warhol, Mark Rothko, and Josef Albers. Those masters, however, mostly used conventional paint and brush for their statements. Maeda makes his art with his own inventions. He photographs food-objects, inserts the subsequent images onto his flatbed scanner, blows them up, and then manipulates the pixels as if they were his paints. His $89.00 scanner serves as a kind of simultaneous canvas and pigment-producer. Maeda tells me that he began this particular series in the wake of the terrible events of 9/11. He wanted to do something, he said, that was "basic and happy." And frankly, what's more basic or happier than food?

Technique-wise, some of the new works grew out of his frustrations with materials he'd employed in his first Cristinerose show. "I don't believe in art supply stores," he maintains. "Great materials can be found anywhere. I went to Home Depot to buy my materials and I just fabricated my own things for the show. The problem with the Home Depot stuff was that I made an incredible amount of garbage—sacks and sacks of garbage—and I felt incredibly bad."



LEFT "Tea for Two" inset in full-scale detail/40x30-inch Cibachrome Print
RIGHT "Veggie Soup" inset in full-scale detail/20x30-inch Cibachrome Print

At the same moment that Maeda was suffering guilt pangs about his wastefulness, he was traveling the world promoting Rizzoli's 480-page compendium of his life's work, *MAEDA@MEDIA.* Wherever he went on the book tour, he noticed the prevalence of "free-food," those packets of sugar, ketchup, and mustard that are consistently a part of room-service trays worldwide. "I thought," he recalls, "this stuff is like paint. These are materials to work with."

Once back in the frame-house in Lexington Massachusetts that he shares with his wife, Kris, and their four young daughters, John began playing with all these new "materials" he'd collected. Kris was bemused as John put Cheetohs onto their scanner and began manipulating the results into virtual monarch butterflies, creating a piece he later dubbed "Butterfries."

The kids loved the rainbow-colored Jell-O mold that Dad cooked up for a Hans Hofmann-like piece he'd digitized; for once in their lives, it was okay for them to eat the art supplies.

In another experiment, John opened up one of his sugar packets and wrote a computer program that was able to count exactly how many crystals there were in one sweet little sack. The number was in the neighborhood of 70,000, something he found "amazing." After magnifying and arranging 70,000 sugar grains, Maeda created "Tea for Two," a piece that can't be termed "abstract," because, it is reality.

Visitors to the Cristinerose/Josee Bienvenu Gallery are likely to have fun at this show. The recipe for the exhibition seems to be equal parts of Norbert Weiner, Julia Child, Marcel Duchamp, George Seurat and Andy Warhol, all filtered through John Maeda's wild and crazy scanner.

Speaking of Warhol, viewers should be sure to take a long look at "Large Soup" and "Veggie Soup," which are John Maeda's tribute to the popmaster's Campbell Soup pieces. Cristinerose Gallery's Mariacristina Parravicini has actually shown Andy Warhol and she sees these works as more than a mere homage. "This new body of work, visually, has a strong Pop Art sensibility," she notes.

To make the two soup pieces, Maeda scoured dozens of supermarkets until he found one of every variety of the Campbell's line and then he scanned their labels and merged it all into the pointillist pieces that dominate this exhibition. Look at them and you'll see Warhol, but also Piet Mondrian, and a soupcon (forgive the pun) of Paul Klee.

Says the artist of these two works: "I used the cans as a launch pad and I began making these very dense plays with them. I've taken little pieces out of all the different cans and arranged them in little parts. You have a kind of fractured sense of all the similarities and dissimilarities of the cans."

There's something very democratic about this exhibition and indeed the entire body of John Maeda's work. He wants technology to bring us closer to the realities of our earth and of course, human social organizations. Remembering the time when his own artistic impulses were thwarted, he wants us to feel that we all can be artists—if we only look carefully at what is around us, and if we wisely use the wondrous new tools available at the electronics shop.

"I love all these new digital cameras that everyone is using," he admits. "They make people feel that they can connect to their environment viscerally. At the same time, they challenge the professional artist to define the level of what it means to be a pro. Everyone now has access to the best tools and processes, and the race has changed. That's why in this exhibition I choose to go for the most average type of tools to create things."

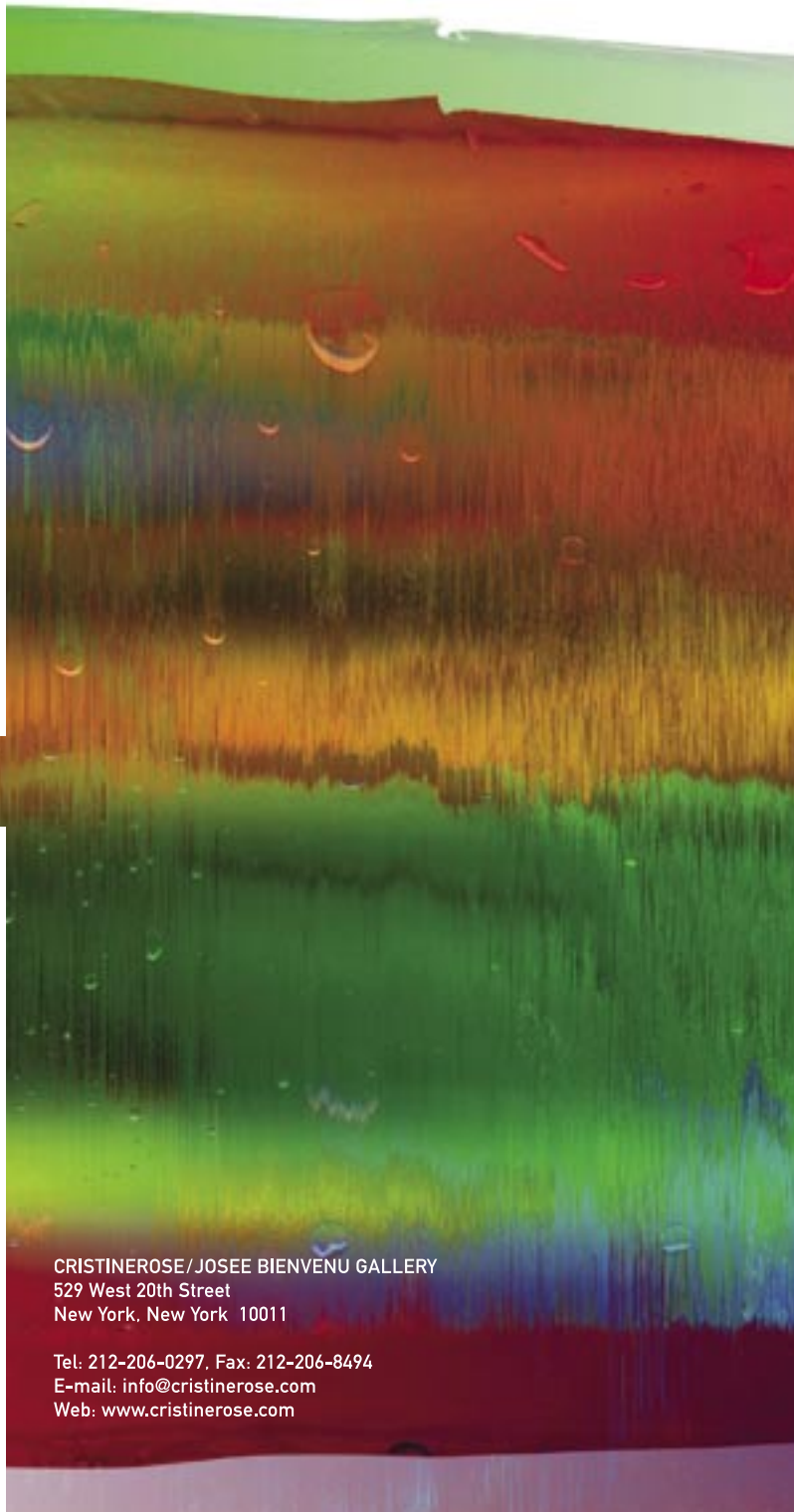
The tools, as you'll see, may well be "average." The work is not.

Artist's Biography

Born 1966, Seattle, Washington, USA.

John Maeda is Muriel Cooper Professor of Media Arts and Sciences at the MIT Media Laboratory in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Maeda's early work redefined the use of electronic media as a core material for expression by combining skilled computer programming with sensitivity to traditional artistic concerns. He is the 2001 recipient of the nation's highest career honor in design—the National Design Award—and Japan's highest honor—the 2001 Mainichi Design Prize. Maeda is author of two books: *Design By Numbers,* MIT Press, and the 480-page retrospective *MAEDA@MEDIA,* Rizzoli/Thames & Hudson. Listed by *Esquire Magazine* as one of the "21 Most Important People of the 21st Century," in 2001 Maeda was honored with the world's largest solo digital media exhibition, "Beyond Post Digital," at the NTT InterCommunication Center in Tokyo, Japan. Maeda's work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and was the subject of two simultaneous one-man shows at the California College of Arts and Crafts Logan Galleries in 2000.

Maeda is currently scheduled for a retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, England in the summer of 2003, and an exhibition at the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, Paris, France in 2005.



CRISTINEROSE/JOSEE BIENVENU GALLERY
529 West 20th Street
New York, New York 10011

Tel: 212-206-0297, Fax: 212-206-8494
E-mail: info@cristinerose.com
Web: www.cristinerose.com