For US artist James Clar, technology is art

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AFP/Ho/File Photo: This undated rendition obtained from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, shows the...

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Sun Feb 26, 2:50 PM ET

MEMPHIS, Tennessee (AFP) - Science is rarely mistaken for art. But new-media artist James Clar has found new means of expression trying to the overcome the limitations of everyday devices.

"Art to me is about developing your own style of communication," says Clar. "And technology is about communication. So to integrate the two just seems logical."

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Clar, 26, is currently exhibiting his award-winning 3D Display Cube at the Japan Media Arts Festival in Tokyo. The hand-built cube, a freestanding matrix of 1,000 individually controllable LEDs, can create a low-resolution, three-dimensional television.

Fully interactive, it can connect to a camera or soundboard for live video and audio, and allow designers to create 3D animations instantaneously without needing to write a computer program.

"I grew up with video games and animation," says Clar, who admits pop culture has a large influence on his work, whether it is as obvious as his redesign of the Adidas logo with fluorescent tubes or using his Display Cube to play 3D Pong, or not.

His most ambitious work will be built in Barcelona, Spain in 2008 with the construction of the Habitat Hotel, designed by Enric Ruiz of Cloud 9 Architecture.

Clar designed the energy mesh that will wrap around the building. Made of 500 tri-color LEDs, during the day the individual nodes will collect energy from sunlight.

At night, the mesh will glow in specific color schemes and brightness determined by imbedded photosensors that gauge the amount of sunlight amplitude collected, which will change the building's glow according to seasons and weather.

Clar and Cloud 9 exhibited a working-scale model of Habitat Hotel at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that opened the first week of February.

"When you grow up in a small town," said Clar, who was raised in Wisconsin, "you have to use your imagination. In high school, my friends and I would make these short videos just for fun."

Clar moved to New York for college, and after a year, changed his major from business to film. "I thought it would just be fun to tell a story."

Halfway through film school, he switched to animation, fascinated by the control it offered.

He found the same fascination in a former love -- video games.

"I used to play video games a lot, but now I just don't have time for them anymore," said the artist, now based in New York City's Brooklyn borough.

The pop-art nuances of animation, the energy of electronic music and his attraction to light seem to push Clar into new aesthetic frontiers. And he is constantly looking to logically combine avocations.

While in Tokyo, he will be disk jockeying at the dance club Ever in conjunction with a light installation he is exhibiting.

Clars's pioneering proclivity has led him to his next project -- at the FedEx Institute of Technology in Memphis, Tennessee.

He was picked to be the institute's inaugural artist in residence. A nearly unique position, it will allow the design wunderkind to tap FIT's deep resources, mentor students and continue creating the kind of interactive light projects that have culled critical acclaim from New York to Milan to Tokyo.

The two-month residency also gives him the chance to collaborate with some of FIT's celebrated researchers, whose names might not be familiar, but whose work -- from innovating the Mars rover to building the brain of the Philip K. Dick android -- are.

"I'll basically be creating a lot of lighting pieces, a lot of visual information design," the artist said last week in his sparse studio on the campus of the University of Memphis.

FIT administrators openly hope the residency fellowship produces the visionary success generated by the project's inspiration: the artist-in-residence program at Xerox Corporation's Palo Alto Research Center.

Xerox PARC is where the first desktop computer was conceptualized, as was the graphical interface that spawned Microsoft Windows and Macintosh operating systems.

"It's a place where science and art seem to be catching up to each other," Eric Mathews, director of FIT's corporate research and development, said. "This program is designed with the belief that science and art should be stirred up. It provides a place to think about science in a new way."

One goal for Clar's residency is to construct a major piece to show at Wired magazine's upcoming NextFest in the fall.

"We're going to try to manufacture a big-scale piece called a Memory Wall," explained Clar. "When you walk past the Memory Wall (constructed of hundreds of liquid pixels), basically you'll trigger a wave that will travel the length of the pixel. So, when people walk past it, they're triggering pixels sending the wave from the front to the back. It's kind of like an interactive architecture piece."

In late April, to close his residency, Clar plans a public installation on top of several downtown rooftops on Main Street Memphis.

"This is going to be a great opportunity to work on a larger scale."