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Blake Gopnik, "Rachel Rose, Driven by Distraction, Heads to the Whitney," *The New York Times*, October 16, 2015

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ART & DESIGN

Rachel Rose, Driven by Distraction, Heads to the Whitney

By **BLAKE GOPNIK** OCT. 16, 2015



Rachel Rose at the Whitney Museum, where she will have her first solo exhibition in the United States. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

The art world is always looking for the Next Big Thing, and right now, the video installations of Rachel Rose look set to be It. This October alone, her work has been featured in London at the Frieze art fair and in a solo show at the Serpentine Gallery, and it is likely to make a splash at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

For the first five months in its grand new building, the museum chose to show off its older treasures; the installation by Ms. Rose, which opens Oct. 30, will be the enlarged Whitney's first dip into a younger cutting edge, with a series of similar encounters to follow.

Ms. Rose throws together images and sounds – visions of the cosmos, the audience at a rock concert, Aretha Franklin emoting – to wrestle with issues that trouble our planet, and our lives. Our predicaments are complex, so her works aim

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for some of the same intricacy, in both what they show us and how they do the showing. Think Ryan Trecartin's video chaos mashed up with J. M. W. Turner's visions of the sublime, plus a dollop of the Whole Earth Catalog.



A still from her Whitney piece "Everything and More" Rachel Rose, via Pilar Corrias, London

With a fall like she's having, most artists would imagine their careers might be peaking. At the venerable age of 28, however, with just four mature works to her name, Ms. Rose is barely into hers. Asked to think of the moment when she got her big break, she can cast her mind back as far as "Right now!"

Ms. Rose was speaking in her sunny office off the Bowery in New York, a studio that has room for her desk and computer, but not much more. Dressed in a white T-shirt and skinny black jeans, with thick auburn hair, she could still pass for your average undergrad, sprinkling her talk with "like" and "kind of."

Get her to drill down into her work, and she seems resolute and mature. She's especially eager to explain that her video palimpsests (her word) are more than attractive collages. Her new, space-based Whitney piece — her first American solo show — is called "Everything and More." It's named after David Foster Wallace's book on infinity and when it bounces among an astronaut's account of seeing Earth from orbit, Aretha's gasps and sighs, and the ecstasy of electronic dance music, it's meant to bring us closer, if only crabwise, to our current condition as earthlings.

One of her earlier videos (earlier meaning from 13 months ago) begins with borrowed YouTube footage of a brutal summer hailstorm on a Russian beach. It then cuts to a complex montage about the architect Philip Johnson's 1949 Glass House, made to stand for the modernist ideas of progress that got us where we are today, and for our love-hate relationship with such notions.

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A still from her Whitney piece "Everything and More" Rachel Rose, via Pilar Corrias, London

"I could choose to think about global warming from a political perspective," Ms. Rose said, "but I choose to think about it from an emotional one: What is my personal anxiety about our relationship to the environment?" That, she explains, may not end up being as straightforward as some tidy political statement. "Maybe it isn't just anxiety that I feel about global warming and catastrophe," she said. "Maybe I also feel some ecstasy in it. Maybe I also feel some boredom in there." Christopher Y. Lew, the Whitney curator who offered Ms. Rose her show, said that from the moment he saw her work, when she was still in graduate school in New York, he was struck "by how she was able to gather such a mix of images, and of content as well, and weave it into a unique narrative." She pulled some kind of order, he said, out of our whirlpool of information, without ever denying the flood. "It's a constant distraction that we're living in, so having a work that constantly bleeds between different things" — Ms. Rose's palimpsest — "may not be by accident," Mr. Lew said.

That "bleed" will be reinforced in Ms. Rose's Whitney installation. Weirdly, the museum's screening room comes with a back wall that's floor-to-ceiling windows, normally covered. Ms. Rose has decided to replace the room's blackout blinds with a translucent scrim, revealing a veiled view of the city. Depending on the time of day and the weather, her audience's gaze will be forever shifting between her projection's remote visions of space exploration and the real cityscape glimpsed beyond them — as palimpsestuous as any art could get.

There's an obvious danger with Ms. Rose's approach. So much is going on in her videos that a viewer can come away dazed and confused, with only the vaguest sense of what the work is getting at. It can seem generically "poetic" (an adjective used in much of the writing about her videos) rather than pointed, pithy and condensed, which is the hallmark of most really good poetry.

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A still from “A Minute Ago,” Ms. Rose’s 2014 video featuring Philip Johnson’s 1949 Glass House. Rachel Rose, via Pilar Corrias, London

Ms. Rose is aware of the issue. She explained that she got into graduate school as an abstract painter, as poetic a practice as could be – if by poetry you mean indistinct lyricism. Soon, her creations began to feel so divorced from what mattered in the world that it led to a wholesale career crisis. “There was almost a year where I just didn’t make anything,” Ms. Rose said. “Where I’d have studio visits, and I’d just ask the person in the studio visit about, like, their life, and what it was like for them to be an artist, almost trying to be convinced that it could be something.”

It was this deliberate unproductivity that especially impressed Rirkrit Tiravanija, an artist who has been one of Ms. Rose’s teachers and mentors. “She gave herself time to think through her ideas, her reasons for being, and she pushed herself far enough and found the meaning at the end of her limits,” he wrote in an email.

As Ms. Rose explained it, art for art’s sake simply didn’t mesh with an upbringing, on a farm in upstate New York, where dinner-table talk was about weighty issues, hashed out between a mother in humanitarian aid and an urban planner father. (She tidily leaves out one detail: His “planning” comes in the context of a vast real estate empire. Jonathan F. P. Rose, who develops sustainable housing, is the scion of the same Rose clan whose name is on Manhattan’s Rose Center for Earth and Space and the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Rose Cinemas.) Ms. Rose would get more doses of heavyweight thinking as she gathered an improbably perfect résumé: A bachelor’s degree from the art department at Yale; a master’s in art history from the august Courtauld Institute in London (following in the footsteps, she said, of the rigorous art star Jeff Wall); and then a Master of Fine Arts at Columbia University, one of the country’s top choices for that degree.

Shelly Silver, the new-media artist who heads that program, recalled Ms. Rose as having been “off-the-charts” talented, even as a painter. And she remembered how video had come to the rescue when painting was no longer filling her student’s needs. Ms. Rose taught herself the tricks of the video trade, and while not even owning a computer, she came up with a “can’t-keep-up-with-it” editing style that, according to Ms. Silver, provokes a response “like little explosions in the brain.”

Her work comes at the troubles in our world, Ms. Silver said, and greets them with “a Nietzschean, joyous ‘No!’ ”