

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Andrew Mearkle, "Rachel Rose," *ArtiT*, October, 2016



## Rachel Rose

### OF TIME RAN GOLDEN

By Andrew Maerkle



*Everything and More* (2015), HD video, 10 min 31 sec. All images: Courtesy Pilar Corrias Gallery, London, and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

Born in 1986 and based in New York, Rachel Rose has wowed art watchers on both sides of the Atlantic over the past year through solo exhibitions at the Serpentine Gallery in London, from October to November 2015, and the Whitney Museum in New York, from October 2015 to February 2016, respectively. Investigating themes ranging from the nature of death in contemporary society to the legacy of architect Philip Johnson's Glass House and the experience of an astronaut in outer space, her video installations combine arresting visual compositions with carefully calibrated sound elements and site-specific adjustments, such as the projection of the work *Everything and More* onto a scrim at the Whitney, so that the video blended into the Manhattan cityscape visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows beyond it. After her latest solo exhibition at the Aspen Art Museum, which ran from March 10 to June 12 of this year, Rose is participating in her first exhibition in Japan, the Okayama Art Summit 2016, directed by artist Liam Gillick. ART iT met with Rose when she came to do a site visit in Okayama, and spoke with her about her works.

The Okayama Art Summit 2016, "Development," runs from October 9 to November 27 at multiple venues in Okayama.

#### Interview:

**ART iT:** I thought we could start with a big question. In your works so far you've dealt with themes including death, Modern architecture, the history of a place, and outer space. All these themes touch upon the idea of universal experiences – death in particular – but their universality could also be disputed. For example, the act of dying itself differs between cultures, while the experience of outer space is limited to a very few, select people. Certainly, it's important to think critically about the idea of universal values or universality, but at the same time, if we reject the idea of universality, it can lead to various forms of cultural fundamentalism, which is what happens in the debate on human rights – are human rights universal, or are they culturally specific? I know this is a lot to unpack, but how do you see the universality in your own works?

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**RR:** That's a great question, and I think it gets to the thing I struggle with when I make a work, which is, what is meaning, and why try to find meaning in anything? It's universal to want to know about that. But when I make a work I'm not taking a universal approach. It's personal, and always comes from something I'm directly experiencing, which I then attach to something real – a specific site.

**ART iT:** Would you say, for example, that the idea of deathfulness, which you addressed in the work *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* (2013), already implies a critique of the universality of death?

**RR:** Yes. I began that work in a place of depression, and out of a fear of death. But when I worked on the project, traveling to a cryogenics lab, a robotics perception lab and zoos across the country – death was unstable, culturally specific. What counts as dying or not dying changes over time and is culturally determined.



Both: *A Minute Ago* (2014), HD video, 8 min 43 sec.

**ART iT:** In the current media environment, anybody can put something on YouTube and people all around the world can watch it, so it creates the sense that things are universal or at least contemporaneous, but at the same time the local contexts behind these videos remain obscured.

**RR:** I think to observe something at a distance brings a different set of sensations than to touch, feel, do something close up. That's part of why filming or making real sites is so important for me. While the facts or specifics of the sites shouldn't be discounted, neither am I relying on them as access points – for me it's in the feeling. I don't mean to obscure the local context of each site either, but more bring out the feeling I perceive within it.

**ART iT:** I imagine *A Minute Ago* (2014) is a work that gets talked about in this way.

**RR:** Yes. The Glass House is and isn't essential to that work. For me it is actually about glass in architecture at large. Why is this window right here, or anywhere? You see windows in architecture everywhere, all the time. And I didn't start that work with the Glass House. I arrived there in a roundabout way. I had started looking into the history of glass architecture in New York City, where I live, and wanting to understand how glass could emerge as such a prevalent force in the cityscape. That led me to the International Style and from there to the Glass House – a symbol of that movement.

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**ART iT:** Poussin's painting, *The Burial of Phocion* (1648), is on permanent display in the Glass House, so in a sense the connection between the house and the painting that emerges in *A Minute Ago* is predetermined. Was it just that simple for you, or was there an underlying roundabout-ness to the very presence of the painting in the house as well?

**RR:** The painting is there, but at the time I happened to be reading TJ Clark's *The Sight of Death*, a small book on two Poussin paintings, *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* and *Landscape with a Calm*. Clark writes about how everything Poussin painted was essentially frozen in the moment because it's all so hyper-clear – every leaf is perfectly held just as it is, and every scene is infinitely detailed. I remember, when I saw the painting in the house, feeling that there was this alliance between the way Poussin had painted this body on its way to burial and the way the house is preserved as a mausoleum both to Johnson and to the idea of Modernism, and glass – and feeling that there was a shared presence between the two. I guess that's incidental to the fact that the painting is actually in the house, but I was thinking about it also from this different perspective.

**ART iT:** I'm not sure how much it already concerns you, but how do you approach the dynamic of the poor image in relation to the high-definition image in your work? It's right there in *A Minute Ago*, through the way that the video of the Siberian hailstorm you found on YouTube collapses into the footage you shot at the Glass House.

**RR:** I think about it in terms of authorship and my hand, and also in terms of how I spend money on a project. So far, I have tried to do almost everything myself. It's important because I think of making a work almost as if I'm writing – the edit on the timeline begins to feel like words strung together. Sometimes what that means is that I'm working and halfway or toward the end of the project I need something specific that I haven't shot, but I don't have the time or the budget to shoot it. That's usually when I appropriate footage. When I do that, I end up touching and sculpting what I find. But as with editing, my first instinct for gathering material is to actually go to a place and physically be there and script the shots myself. I want to touch every aspect of how I'm recording the material.



Above: *Palisades in Palisades* (2014), installation view in "Rachel Rose: Palisades" at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London, 2015. Below: *Palisades in Palisades* (2014), HD video, 9 min 31 sec.

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**ART IT:** I was also thinking of all the images of paintings that recur in your works. Even if these images have been processed in high-definition video, they are necessarily poor in relation to the "original," and in some cases it even looks as though you're working from secondary reproductions.

**RR:** When I make a video I try to put the footage in time for myself and for the viewer. For instance, in *Palisades in Palisades* (2014), I artificially added camera flash spots to the images of the paintings so that you might feel as if you were there looking at the painting in the same moment as I was. I don't want to present you with a painting without acknowledging its presence with me in the moment. That's essential to that video, because it's so much about the cycle of time from the present back into the past and back into the present again. Then, at the end, with the painting of George Washington and his wife and daughter, when you see it submerged in my bathtub it becomes clear that the first time you saw it, it was just a cutout from a book. I was using the flimsiness of its surface to move back and forth through time.

**ART IT:** That was an oddly touching scene for me. The material, homely image of these pieces of paper floating in your bathtub stood in contrast to the floating, videogame-style, high-definition video in the park. The bathtub scene represented a return to familiar modes of representation – something anybody could do at home with a video camera – which came into tension with the hi-tech images that preceded it. At the same time, it's still a mediated image.

**RR:** I also did something like that with *Everything and More* (2015), which I shot partly at a neutral buoyancy lab where astronauts used to go learn how to space walk. It's actually a really basic facility – just a deep pool of water. And the astronaut suit, which the camera goes in and out of, is also really basic – just metal fabric. But the rest of the video I shot at home in my kitchen using things like milk, oil, ink, and food dye to produce all the other images that may read as special effects, but are actually not. The effect isn't complicated, expensive or digital. I continually return to making through the handmade and everyday, using what's available here in real life.

**ART IT:** How do you deal with emotion in your work? The videos are so dense, I felt I had to watch them several times to understand them. And the first time I watched them, they were so intense and so quickly paced that they seemed almost devoid of emotion, until you come to more elegiac scenes like the bathtub. So with *Everything and More*, for example, does the footage you shot in your kitchen also become an emotional entry point for you?

**RR:** You mention the tempo and that the work can feel really fast and high volume – that there's a lot happening. Something I thought about for *Everything and More* was a different approach to time. With each work, I'm working with time on a micro level – what does 30 seconds feel like, what does three minutes feel like, what does eight minutes feel like – and readjusting every few seconds in relation to a timeline of eight or nine minutes. I am conscious of how pacing affects feeling. In *Everything and More* the work originated from an experience I had of a kind of loosening – a detachment from everyday, earthly life. I strongly felt that I didn't want any sharp cuts in the film. There are a few in the section of concerts, because that's a moment of human time and experience and it felt appropriate, but there are no cuts anywhere else. I wanted to feel that same looseness in the materials in my kitchen, this sensation of blobbing through time rather than being shocked through time. In contrast, in *A Minute Ago* you're thrown here and there, and it's like – "ah!" – ecstatic or something. So *Everything and More* has a different tone because the feeling from which it was coming was different.



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**Above:** *Everything and More* (2015), HD video, 10 min 31 sec. **Below:** *Everything and More* (2015), installation view in "Rachel Rose: Everything and More" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 2015–16.

**ART IT:** This idea of editing the works in terms of both a micro and a macro scale across different spans of time is fascinating to me. In that sense, what do you think about montage? Previously, with regard to *A Minute Ago*, you talked about how the window itself is already a kind of montage or collage. Have your thoughts on montage developed since then?

**RR:** I think about editing distinctly each time. It also has to do with how I feel the sound. In the case of *A Minute Ago* – looking at the catastrophic feeling of global warming through film is predated by the old ties between collage and catastrophe. How can trauma feel as is it's been cut and pasted into your reality. I was interested in looking at this in each shot, in compositing – basically, montage within a frame. That was something I was working with for the first time in *A Minute Ago*. With *Everything and More*, I was using frequencies to structure the edit. Our voices are a frequency that originates from our bodies and releases from our bodies to float outside of us. When I interviewed the astronaut, Dave Wolf, his voice sounded the way I imagined his body would be in outer space, something floating in emptiness. But that's always how sound is. It's this ripple that happens in emptiness. So I looked at his voice through a spectrograph and it was this visual of how I imagined his body. I wanted to do something with that. In terms of montage or cutting the sound, I took a performance by Aretha Franklin and put it in the spectrograph. I erased by hand all the frequencies around her voice and recomposed the performance to express itself as frequency – an extension of the frequency that I felt was essential to what and how Dave Wolf was speaking. So that's a very different relationship between sound and image compared to, for example, *Palisades in Palisades*, where I created the sound notationally, as descriptive of time alongside the image. You could look at the park as it is now, but hear the ricochet of a bullet and know that you could simultaneously be in this other time. I wrote the sounds into the script, because they were characters, in a sense.

**ART IT:** One thing I think your works touch upon is the idea of what I would call "technology into representation." In *Palisades in Palisades*, for example, you show this sequence that starts with what appears to be someone etching, framed very tightly, and then there's a detail of a print, and then the camera pulls out to give the bigger picture. In the engraving footage the tools and the surfaces are shot in such a way that it's not exactly clear that it's an engraving. It could be footage from a hi-tech electronics factory, although in any case there is the connection that something is being scooped out from a metal surface, and that action bridges the hi-tech and the low. I think it works well that way, because it makes you question what you just saw.

**RR:** You were saying that in *Palisades in Palisades*, the way the camera moves from far away to super close-up looks really hi-def, but it's actually not hi-def at all. If you look at the footage, it's pretty degraded. It's not high quality, but the camera movement feels as though it is because all the in-between spaces are in equal definition. We're used to seeing different distances cut. We're looking from far away one moment, then cut to close up. But I worked with a remote control lens, which entailed me turning a hand-remote control to focus the lens and light every few seconds as I moved shoulder to shoulder with a friend and the camera operator. Its construction is actually bodily and low-tech.

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As I was editing, I saw that the shots moved the view through space and air, but also pixels. I looked at the pixels and they're squares. I was simultaneously looking at all these historical prints of the Hudson River, Palisades Park and the Battle of Fort Lee, and I noticed (un-strikingly) that this crosshatching of the image and our eyes seeing through the crosshatch is how we've consumed images for so long. The pixel is not dissimilar to the engraving. It's the same format, which is kind of crazy – how unchanged our formats are. I was trying to use the actual surface of video to move through time, the same way I was using the skin of the woman, the canvas of the paintings or their reprinted magazine paper. I'm not sure anybody notices, but when you first come back to the scene in the park after the engraving sequence, you can see pixels faintly in the image. Then they dissolve as the camera moves closer to the woman's body, and the image definition increases, releasing you back into the scene. But for the first few seconds in the park after the engraving, there are blown up pixels fluttering around on the surface, keeping you back in the engraving.