

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Emma Drew, "Remains of Day," *Art Writing*, January 10, 2018

**artwriting**<sub>mfa</sub>

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Rachel Rose. *Lake Valley* (2016); film still, HD video, 8:25. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome.

## Remains of a Day

by Emma Drew (Class of 2017)

What do we learn about animation from Rachel Rose's *Lake Valley* (2016)? It's a pertinent question because Rose, a moving image artist who makes videos by skillfully blending her own filmed live-action footage with that found elsewhere, endeavored to teach herself about animation processes and techniques. Through a mixture of meticulous celluloid animation, hand-drawn at 12 frames per second, and frenetic, overfull paper collages, Rose puts forth the answer to this and another, related question: what do we learn about childhood? As evidenced here, both can be simple yet inscrutable, built on fleeting moments of necessary but tenuous connections.

The 8-and-a-half minute HD video, recently on view at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, is partially sourced from children's book illustrations largely from the Victorian age. They recall the paper dolls and cut-outs of that era as well its notoriously grim and lonely conception of childhood. Rose evokes form and feeling as one with these fragments, which are a testament both to the visual culture of the period as well as her interest in self-determination and the solitary side of being young.

*Lake Valley* roughly follows a family—dad, daughter, and a pet that looks like a cross between a dog and a bunny—through a day and a night, though the times and spaces traveled to are indeterminate. Images happen as events in a story: a pot of pasta boils a tangle of inky blue bubbles and strands of yellow hair; the father and daughter leave the pet at home; a giant egg cracks open to spill its multicolored guts; fireworks go off. An assumption that images and narrative are meant to work with

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each other becomes questionable. The logic of their entwining and undoing by Rose's hands seeps into the viewer's consideration of her own recollections. The scenery is either straightforwardly drawn, like the backseat of a family car, or sumptuously constructed, like the flowers that look sculpted out of scraps of fabric. Lake Valley has tones, not themes: the joint excitement and boredom of the unknown; the absentmindedness of children, both wonderful and cruel and the ease with which they abandon objects and thoughts; the mundane, mind-fucking experience of being within a circumscribed space like suburbia.



Rachel Rose. *Lake Valley* (2016); installation view, Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, 2017. Photo: Lance Brewer.

True to Rose's favored installation style, two bulky, oversized speakers stood at the back of the open room, rumbling, gargling, and chirping, its soundtrack heavy with both everyday sound effects and otherworldly, synthesized strains.

Rose likes to physicalize the experience of sound (and light, when possible) and make the apparatuses of perception known. The exhibition space was open to the outside world via the gallery's raised garage door and the throbbing of the video's environmental soundscape, never quite in lock-step with the images on screen, brought the Harlem evening in. The installation was accessible from 6pm to 6am daily in an effort to enhance the dreamlike world the artist was apparently after. I don't know if the cloudy, dinnertime sky looming to my right fully achieved this—in the dead of night or nascent dawn the effect might be magnified. It would be fun to stumble out of bed and into Rose's world: the transition would not be perfect, but for once seamlessness does not seem to be the point for her.

Rose is first and foremost a conflator of spaces. She'd like you to move from the surface of a painting to a New Jersey cliff (Palisades, Palisades, 2014), from a Serbian hailstorm to Philip Johnson's Glass House (A Minute Ago, 2014), from macro-shots of swirling food dye to drone footage of a concert (Everything And More, 2015). She often uses the word 'composite' to describe her work. Her video-making techniques—clever cuts and digitally manipulated movements—previously worked to elide



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moments of difference, to smooth over, to “trompe l’oeil” the edit.<sup>1</sup> Lake Valley is perhaps her flattest work in terms of sheer two-dimensionality, but she’s forgone flow for something more realistic, or true to life, in the way that déjà-vu is true to life. There is little to grasp or submerge into, and the loop is strange: we end up back at the beginning, but out of step. I watched the video for 40 minutes and fixated on a beginning and an end that were not the ones Rose intended. I watched the wrong story.



Rachel Rose. Lake Valley (2016); film still, HD video, 8:25. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome.

What Lake Valley captures, or reveals, is not an unbroken stream of consciousness associated with dreams, imagination, or childhood reverie and the attendant string of images spooling out from one another. Rather, it evinces the jarring nature of such transitions, and the feelings associated with not quite knowing where one is in the world, with navigating physical states of matter and emotional spaces at the same time, with the clatter of a meal and the psychedelia of an up-from-below viewpoint.

I watched to find my favorite sequence, rather than just follow along. Big waves of burnt orange rolling over cartoon mountains and valleys; a father's massive hand nudging his daughter awake; a cross-section of a knotty wooden staircase; the local school appropriately abandoned in middle of the night: these are the visual vignettes that stayed with me, cut from the narrative, untouched by the rest. Or are they? As the pet, alone in a forest, burrows further into the brush, the scenery constantly changes. More precisely it is replaced, piecemeal but rapidly, with new layers of texture and color and shape. It's a bit like walking on a path that unfolds (or crumbles) with every step, the pet's curiosity and search for companionship making its satisfaction all the more unobtainable.

What is a layer? This was the thought in my mind after several viewings, as if the concept so used, particularly in art-making and art-writing and art-thinking, had all along been left unspecified, or here was made particularly alien. Rose undoubtedly sought to literalize her understanding of such a question with cel animation and paper collage. Metaphorically, she targets the wandering, waiting, and the stretches of being alone that overlap and underline a process of self-determination. These are moments that accrue, but don't add up; moments that mean something but it's not clear what or whether meaning is only in relation to something else, some other part of self or memory.

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Etymologically speaking, “layer” (the noun) is essentially the same word as “lair,” though “lair” is more ancient and differentiated in sense. In Old English, the shared root word means “the act or place of lying down; bed, couch; illness; the grave.” In Old Frisian, a West Germanic language spoken between the 8th and 16th centuries in the area from present-day Rotterdam to Hamburg, it is simply “the situation.”<sup>2</sup> In Lake Valley, the situation is one of little respite from the demands of negotiating inner and outer worlds, even in repose.

When the pet can find no companion or way home in the forest, it lies down and dreams, appearing to briefly leave its curled up body, curiosity unabated. Later, the young girl floats above her bed while asleep; a brief interlude, and then she floats in royal blue bathwater, her face, hands, and pillow rising to the surface. As she wakes up, she tosses her head from side to side, and the image of her face lingers in two places at once, a bleary-eyed, peach-cheeked Janus. This is the most affecting visual articulation of layers of meaning, made visible in this moment of suspended stirring. Here, Rose’s animation reflects the relationships we have with the clandestine places called dreams, imagination, and even very intense emotions—places happened upon that don’t fully relate to their surroundings. These worlds within worlds, mirroring and unsettling waking life, define human geography and a budding self-articulation. In the fantasy life of a child playing with paper dolls is a traversal of such spaces—experienced as images and raw feelings—that we assume someday will all connect.