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'The Cinema Effect': moving image as fine art

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London-based video artist Runa Islam's 1998 work "Tuin," shown here as it appears in a gallery installation, is one of the artworks featured in "The Cinema Effect" at the Hirshhorn. (Image courtesy of Jay Joplin/White Cube, photo by Gerry Hohansson)

In the fifth century B.C., a contest was staged by two rival Ephesian artists. Each would render a single work of art to see who was the greater painter. The first artist, Zeuxis, unveiled his work, a beautiful still life of grapes. The fruit looked so ripe and luscious that birds flew down to peck at the canvas. Zeuxis then challenged Parrhasius to pull aside the curtain and show his painting, whereupon Parrhasius informed the master that there was no curtain, that, in fact, Zeuxis was looking at Parrhasius's contest entry, the painting of a curtain. Zeuxis was forced to admit defeat.

Kristen Hileman describes this ancient Mediterranean contest as she walks through an exhibition of contemporary acrylics in the second-floor gallery of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. She tells the story to illustrate the expectation that art reflect physical reality. And as the story suggests, sometimes we like being fooled.

Questions of reality and illusion lie at the center of "The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality and the Moving Image," two back-to-back exhibitions that will be on view at the Hirshhorn Museum this year. Comprising multiple installations of artwork in video and film, these ambitious exhibitions will allow visitors to move through a series of black-box theaters where they will encounter artistic illusion, documentary-style reality and some surprising gray areas in between.

"It's exciting, because this is something of a hybrid experience," says Hileman, a Hirshhorn curator. "It's seeing work in a museum space that you would normally experience on a television screen or in a movie theater; but these artists have conceptualized their pieces so that they're meant for a museum space."

Hileman and Curator Anne Ellegood are curating "Realisms," the second part of "The Cinema Effect." The first installment, called "Dreams," opens in February and is curated by Hirshhorn Chief Curator Kerry Brougher, working with Kelly Gordon, the museum's associate curator.

Dreams and 'Sleep'

"We are creating individual spaces for pretty much every single work in the exhibition," Brougher explains. "We want, in the first show, for people to enter the exhibition and feel as if they are in a labyrinth, that they are going through a

(continued)

night of dreaming...."

Dreaming, of course, requires maintaining some level of darkness, an unusual undertaking for a staff whose priorities usually include making sure that an exhibition's objets d'art are well lit. Aside from meeting fire and accessibility codes—ensuring that all visitors have good access to exits, even in low light—the Hirshhorn's design crews also are wrestling with the challenges of an ever-changing high-tech marketplace.

"Technology changes so fast," says Al Masino, director of exhibitions, design and special projects. "Even something that we researched eight months ago may be no longer available, so we have to find a comparable piece of equipment."

Yet technological advance also is a large part of what makes "The Cinema Effect" possible. A little more than 100 years old, cinema has always been a complicated and high-tech art form. Only during the last 15 years or so has digital filmmaking technology become easy and cheap enough to draw the interest of a critical mass of artists.

"Before, it was always very complicated to place moving-image works into a gallery space," Brougher says. "They required 16-millimeter-loop projectors that broke down all the time."

Before 1980, film was used by the rare gallery artist, such as Andy Warhol, whose lengthy 1963 work "Sleep" is, fittingly, a part of "Dreams." The great majority of work appearing in "The Cinema Effect" was produced during the last 20 years, and according to Brougher, the Hirshhorn is presenting and acquiring a growing number of works by artists working in film and video.

"It's just come on extremely strong," the curator says. "[Film and digital media] are probably used almost as much as photography and painting are today and it's probably used even more than sculpture."

Cinema in art

Brougher becomes animated as he describes the influence of cinema in art and in everyday life. A former director of the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, England, Brougher has been observing and thinking about these issues since at least 1996, when he curated "Hall of Mirrors: Art and Film Since 1945" at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. The curator remembers believing, at the time, that the medium had reached its pinnacle.

"Well, I was wrong," he says with a smile. "Film and video took off even more after that!"

Brougher sits in his sparsely decorated office and speaks with passion about the many ways—in news, advertising, Web-based media, war propaganda, diplomacy and art—that film and television have ig-

nited our thinking and culture. Even architecture—what German architect Walter Gropius called "the final goal of all artistic activity"—has been embellished (or obscured) by cinema.

"Imagine walking through Times Square," Brougher suggests. "You look up and see buildings whose facades have become digital billboards—projections of images. The buildings become almost liquid. They're almost not there; they're just big cinema screens."

This is the stuff of art, food for thought for such artists as Anthony McCall, Candice Breitz and Douglas Gordon, all featured in "The Cinema Effect." Like the ancient painting of Parrhasius, Gordon's work, "Off Screen," featured in "Dreams" will have visitors peeking around the edge of a cinematic curtain and wondering what part of their experience is real. Another piece, "Mother + Father," by Candice Breitz, appropriates film clips of Julia Roberts, Steve Martin, Meryl Streep, Dustin Hoffman and other actors and actresses, all playing parents.

"You're laughing along with them," Hileman says. "And all of a sudden, you really see these gender stereotypes playing out. It spins you into this loop: Do movies create these portrayals based on our culture? Or do the movies infiltrate the culture, directing the ways that a mom or a dad can be?"

Cohesive statement

The task of selecting artists and installing their art for the exhibition was similar to mounting a Hollywood production. The Hirshhorn curators and design staff worked closely with nearly 40 artists to create the sometimes elaborate gallery installations. The technology involved was daunting.

"It works best," Masino explains, "when the designers and installation crew can work closely with the curators and the artists, and we produce the cohesive statement that the artist is trying to make. We're most successful when all exhibition props and technology are invisible to the viewer. We want our work to be totally invisible, so that people can appreciate the art."

One piece, "You and I Horizontal," by Anthony McCall, requires projecting images onto a manufactured vapor. Another, Stan Douglas' "Overture," employs the early Thomas Edison film of a moving train set to a recorded-voice reading of the opening to Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Hileman is most interested in the different responses to each of the two parts of "The Cinema Effect." Her proposal for the second exhibition, "Realisms," was born out of her fascination with the growth of the reality-TV phenomenon.

"I really do think it represents the defining cultural trend of our time," the associate curator says. "We're now 10 years into the reality-TV phenomenon, and we're at a moment when people are not just passively watching TV or film—they're actually making their own movies and putting them on YouTube."

One hope for "The Cinema Effect," the curators say, is for visitors to leave the exhibition with a greater awareness of the ways that media makers work their "magic" on filmgoers and television viewers. They also want people to be conscious of the use of dramatic text, bold sound effects and evocative music in everything from commercials and reality shows to broadcast news.

"I think it's because we desire this kind of drama to be presented to us," Brougher says. "We don't experience things as slowly now. We experience so much as moving images.... I will say, however, that these artists are using the medium to comment back on it again. They are raising certain issues about the cinema and about the whole nature of our contemporary culture."

In effect, one might say, the artists of "The Cinema Effect" at the Hirshhorn are telling us something about the high-tech drapery that stands between us—the audience—and the "real thing."❖

Above: This still (detail) is from video artist Douglas Gordon's 1998 video "Off Screen," one of the works featured in "The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality and the Moving Image," opening at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in February. In "Off Screen," an image of a curtain is projected onto a screen that is a curtain itself. "For me, the idea of the off-screen is as interesting, if not more so, than what is happening right in front of you," Gordon has said. (Image courtesy of Gagosian Gallery, New York)

Opposite top: This still is from Siebren Versteeg's 2005 "Neither Here Nor There," a computer-driven installation in which Versteeg's image dissolves, one pixel at a time, and moves from one flat LCD screen to another. (Photo courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery).

Opposite bottom: Inhabiting a place between fantasy and reality, video artist Kelly Richardson's "Exiles of the Shattered Star" presents a beautiful countryside showered with what appear to be remnants of another world. (Image courtesy of Kelly Richardson)