

On Rachel Clarke's *Awakening*

"I have come to realize that digital technologies, so much less tangible and more mutable than technologies past, are a perfect metaphor for the times we live in...." Rachel Clarke

"In dreams begins responsibility." William Butler Yeats

With this exhibition, *Awakening*, Rachel Clarke invites you to enter the spaces of her mind – her sense of life today – a heightened poetic, political consciousness edged with the hopeful, absurdist fatalism of an artist-master and eternal apprentice of the postmodern sublime. As you experience *Awakening*, do not imagine that you have crossed a threshold from life to art. The artist will suspend you between them, and between other opposing states of awareness – the subjective and objective, the past and the present, the dream and awakedness – states not of action or conviction but of uneasy provisionality. Bring with you into *Awakening's* virtual, material and sound environments your memories of the kinds of places Borges, William Gibson, and other poets of real unreality have taken you; recall thoughts you had there that could have been thought by men and women of any age, and other thoughts that could only be of your own time. For Clarke's new animation, video, and sound installation, *Flow*, bring as well remembered news images of the Gulf of Mexico oil disaster (pictures you will not have forgotten) that have flooded the media and collective consciousness since April 20, 2010. Remember watching.

Clarke is a poet of the digital sublime; her art has always played at the borders of the virtual and the real. (About the *Somnium* [Latin for "the dream"] works, for example, she asks with a smile, "The retelling of the dream – can you really get it right?") But Clarke is also a political thinker who feels a responsibility to speak about the all-too-real issues of our time that concern her deeply. *Flow*, conceivably the final stage of "*Awakening*," comes out of the artist's sense of urgency about environmental destruction heightened by the frustration she felt watching the BP oil disaster as media spectacle, the emotional disconnect of electrical connectivity, the inescapable complicity of us all, the sheer enormity of it. A social role of artists has always been to articulate what is to others inexpressible; new forms are created for the ever new of contemporary experience. "I just had to make this work," Clarke explains. She has no answers to the world's problems that trouble her, is "unable to make a didactic work," but she has in hand media of artistic expression that emerged with the computer age and are, we imagine, best able to humanize the astounding creative-destructive forces of global communication, postmodernity, and capitalism; and, as in *Flow*, the capacity to make those forces comprehensible to individual subjective consciousness. Collaborations with audio designer Mike Azevedo on the *Somnium* dream works and with composer Stephen Blumberg on *Flow* intensify the sense of embodied mood in Clarke's separate but related theaters of mind.

The McLuhan concept, "the medium is the message," central to our understanding of media and the information age, is also key to understanding the work of this artist. It is the inherent capacity of new media to represent contemporary experience, "characterized," in Clarke's view, "by incredible richness of experience, yet by e sound and time. I love the ephemeral quality of it.... I always use drawing, but other than that, coming to new media wa continuous state of instability and change," that drew her to them in the mid-nineties after earning her BFA in traditional media at Winchester School of Art in the UK and before she began her MFA in electronic art at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, in 1998 (completed in 2001). "I started out in painting and drawing and reached a threshold." She began to include found objects, then light. When computer technology came in, she says, "I couldn't believe it. I was able to move ideas so much further, includas the only way I could do layerings of time and transformations." Since her full-time appointment at Sacramento State in 2001, "in this media everything has completely changed." Clarke likes the fact that it is always changing, that each work requires learning and inventing the very means for its making. "It's not like traditional practice.... It's arduous in a different way. I try to make [the artwork] happen by using new means, by trial and error, always pushing new."

What other artistic media than those Clarke deploys can be right for the subjects of an artist whose very titles – *Somnium* [*Dream*], *Flow*, and *Awakening* – are derived from verbs, nouns suggesting hybrid states of transformation and becoming rather than static being? Clarke has imagined and created interstitial spaces for *Awakening* where virtual and material realities merge. They take us out of ourselves and draw us back in, possibly changed. In *Flow* you might experience and perhaps share the artist's own sense of being immersed in the flows of life and the postmodern sublime where "good" and "evil" mingle and change places. You might share something of her desire (however self-ironic and questioning) to awaken from the spell of media consciousness, the Plato's-cave syndrome, where life outside – including the worst suffering of others and the wreckage of nature – is experienced as mere screen entertainment.

In the end there remains the old avant-garde question *Awakening* inspires, at least in this viewer, as to whether or not any art, and especially art so given to and good at questioning reality, can be where responsibility toward others in the real world begins.

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