

Rachel Rose



The artist Rachel Rose lives and works in New York. Her recent solo show, *Palisades*, at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery in London, features two of her most recent videos, *A Minute Ago* and *Palisades in Palisades*. Rose was also the winner of the 2015 Frieze Artist Award, where she created an immersive, large-scale model of the art fair's tent and, using lighting and sound design, simulated the visual and sonic frequencies of the animals that inhabit Regent's Park. Her current solo show, *Everything and More*, is at the Whitney Museum of American Art until February.

Interview: Ajay RS Hoti

Image: Still from *Everything and More* by Rachel Rose

Ajay RS Hoti Congratulations, Rachel. What a year you've had! Tell me about this Whitney show.

Rachel Rose The show is called *Everything and More* and it's based on and structured around an interview I did with David Wolf, an astronaut with NASA, about his experience with his body in outer space, for example, during a space walk or while he was looking at the Earth at night, seeing the Earth as a void, rather than a presence. I was interested in how we might be able to

consider that experience from the perspective of the Earth, so my approach to the project was from a very everyday perspective. I was interested in using things, objects and techniques, that are very grounded here and applying them to that experience, of outer space.

The first thing I did was to interview David and hear him recount his experiences. The next was to shoot at the Neutral Buoyancy Lab, which is where astronauts go to learn how to walk in space. Essentially, the Neutral Buoyancy Lab consists of a giant pool of water, and submerged within that pool used to be sections of the space station, but now it's used to test space robotics. And then I filmed at home, just using very everyday materials like milk, water, oil and food dye. I shot these materials very close up. All this work brought together three different elements: the astronaut's voice, the Neutral Buoyancy Lab and the everyday liquids and materials. Then came a fourth component, which actually came directly out of my interview with David.

When we spoke it was over the phone and I was really taken by how his voice sounded as he was recounting this state of being and nothingness. Actually, his voice sounded like it was flowing in nothingness – and it was, you know? It was travelling over and through various frequencies before it reached me. I wanted that to be a part of the work, too. I ended up taking a recording of Aretha Franklin when she was very young, before she became famous. It was a

recording of her singing in church. I used a spectrograph, which is an instrument that's used to measure and isolate wavelength frequencies. Aphex Twin uses one, for example, in his music. I also thought it was an instrument that [the film editor and sound designer] Walter Murch had used in *The Conversation* (1974) to create this effect of hearing the voice interact with frequency, but actually he hadn't. So I erased all the frequencies that you could hear around Aretha Franklin's voice – the church, the people, the music, even her words – so all that was left, you just heard this person's voice moving through its frequencies. I made it into kind of a new musical composition. To me it felt like a counterpart and also a component, an aspect, of David recounting his experiences in space.

AH It pleases the geek in me that you find Walter Murch such an influence. One of the most striking aspects of your work is its technical qualities. There's a sort of "hapticness" to both *The Conversation*, and films like it, and your work. It makes attempts to reach places that seem out of reach; making space as real an experience as Earth. If you expand the timeline of something long enough it becomes just a series of moments arrested in time. Its focus becomes internalised, and its concern becomes with the elements of its own structure. Is there anybody else who works like this, or has had a similar influence on your work?

RR For every project I'm looking at a whole host of role models in various

different ways. For example, one of the things I was looking at for *Everything and More* was the work done in both *Gravity* and *Interstellar*, as well as the work done by Douglas Trumbull, the special-effects supervisor on many films, including *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I did look at the work of other filmmakers, for example the films of Terrence Malick, specifically because of his work with voiceover. I had never actually worked with voiceover as a structural component before and I wanted to really think about how to use it – how I might be able to use it diagetically and not, when to sync voiceover to the visuals and when not. I became interested in the correspondence between when voiceover was happening and when it was not happening, and thinking about how that itself could be used as material within the work. But above all, Walter has always been and continues to be the role model for the projects I do with sound and visual material.

AH This show at the Whitney follows your award and commission for Frieze and your solo show at the Serpentine Gallery. Do they relate to each other in any conceptual, practical or thematic way, or do you see the works that you've produced for these show as ongoing research?

RR When I'm working on something – anything – I'm receptive to triggers that may have something to do with starting the next work. Some of the questions that started stirring in *Everything and More* definitely began while I was completing *A Minute Ago*, but I don't have an explicit way of explaining

that. I don't seek out a subject, necessarily. Often I feel like I get really curious or excited about some subject in particular and I want to learn more about it. Maybe there's just a feeling that I can't quite get rid of; some preoccupation that's just there all the time and then that becomes the thing that I need to explore for the next work. Maybe that occurs when my mind is particularly active, because it tends to happen while I'm working on another piece. So they're connected in that way, for sure. I don't necessarily approach new works or new exhibitions from an overarching conceptual position, but there are definitely aspects that converge.

In *A Minute Ago* I was thinking about the boundaries between the outside and the inside, and I was thinking about glass as a kind of barrier. Also I was thinking about glass and its relationship to collage, and I was thinking about forms of catastrophe. There were lots of different aspects converging all at once. To be then speaking to an astronaut about his experience with his body looking at the Earth in outer space, the concept of barriers persisted. With *Everything and More* I'm still thinking, in a way, about thresholds, about what's outside and what's inside, but on a completely different scale. These ideas persist, but that's not necessarily intentional.

AH You have mentioned barriers a few times. In your work I can see certain themes: anxiety, tragedy, catastrophe, glass (as a theme, if you will), in both

contemporary and historic situations. These juxtapositions seem like an attempt at flattening experience, for example, in *A Minute Ago* between the natural and the built environment.

RR I definitely see how that could be read in the work, but I don't think in terms of flattening. I do think, in various ways, about cycles. For instance, in *Palisades in Palisades*, I'm exploring cycles in time located on a particular space or setting. In the work itself this translates as a kind of compressing of time onto the film's subjects: the body, the ground and all the different moments of history embedded within that site. In *A Minute Ago* I was thinking about this kind of compression again, but as it occurs up against glass, that specific material. There was the idea that the glass could serve to compress a set of different conditions together. Think of viewing a hailstorm from inside a glass house as such a condition, as an atmospheric condition. I do think about what would happen if I brought certain concepts together but I don't think that necessarily translates as a flattening of experience.

AH What does film and video mean to you? You trained in painting, you've worked with poetry, prose and performance, but more recently you've focussed your attention on film and video. What about them feels more relevant than previously?

RR I feel that film and video really are tools that allow me to deal with the dimensions that I'm curious about. Before this, I wasn't able to find anything

that had the capacity to hold this process. I feel very grateful to have found editing, filmmaking and sound design as a method of production, as well as to produce meaning for myself, for the questions I had.

Another component of working with film and video is how the work is installed. For example, at the Whitney, the work is installed in front of a glass window and we're projecting onto a scrim that's been stretched in front of the glass. This in itself is a very complicated process because you don't normally project into light, clearly. I was interested in doing that here because in the work you're hearing an astronaut speak about his experiences of being in outer space, so I wanted to bring the sun into the dynamic of the projection. When you look at the sun, in a basic way, you get an understanding of the Earth's limits. We can always look at the sun or the moon and when we do, we realise that the Earth is limited and that it's just this very big, very dense object that's floating as a part of outer space. And so I wanted the surface of the video to be a place where the projection and the sun would meet.

So, in the video, whatever you see as black actually reads as translucent, and when you see white the video appears opaque. The result is that, when you're watching the video, you're oscillating between a kind of weighted, earthly, grounded, being-in-the moment feeling, and a more weightless, virtual, floating feeling of being in your head, watching a moving image. I really try to

use every installation as an opportunity to make physical something that is very central to the editing, and make physical something that is very central to the feeling and the structure of the work, as well as to your own body – how you're absorbing it within the space.

AH The technical aspects of it all sound fascinating. Is this something that feeds into your preparations for shooting?

RR It doesn't feed into when I'm planning to shoot, but definitely, from the earliest point of the work, I'm thinking about various ways to use projection: how you set the scale, the sound, where you're hearing the sound from. All of these are an integral component of the edit.

AH That's really interesting in practical terms, because it means that wherever any of these works may travel they will become site-specific, incorporating all these new dimensional elements from every situation.

RR Absolutely. I think of the work as conditioned for a space, so there are a certain set of qualities that are important, that will always be with the work and how you perceive it. Those qualities can be conditioned for the site that the work is shown within.

The great aspect of having all these opportunities to show the works is actually having the opportunities to work on these aspects. You have the space that you

having the opportunities to work on these aspects. You have the space that you necessarily require to do it. It's not something that you can fabricate in a studio. It's very much about responding to and suturing the work into a place that is outside of the work.

AH The Serpentine Sackler Gallery is not an easy space to work with. Reflecting on your exhibition there, one of the reasons it worked so well was how your films embedded themselves into the space.

RR I was totally inspired by that space. For my particular interests and for those particular works, the gallery was a really exciting place for me to have the opportunity to work in.

AH One last question, which is something I've always wondered about your work: what does catastrophe mean to you?

RR It's a cut-and-pasted state of reality. I think of catastrophe as feeling as though you didn't experience the transition between your present and the event (whatever that event is) itself. It's something where the transitional space in between moments or timelines has been cut. Like a film cut. I thought deeply about the link between catastrophe and collage in *A Minute Ago* and I thought about how often our experience of catastrophe can feel as though that thing, that moment, has been cut and pasted into our reality. Which is what collage is. §

Everything and More is at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,
until February 7.