

Rachel Rose: artist sets out on Gravity-inspired space odyssey

The young artist's new work at New York's Whitney tries to make viewers feel as though they're floating in the heavens - with help from Aretha Franklin

Charlotte Burns

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From space, the Earth appears to plunge into night every 45 minutes. Floating over the dark planet on a moonless night in a sky blacker than you thought possible, all the Earth might look like to you, says Nasa astronaut David Wolf, "is the absence of stars ... You can reach into a shadow so black that your arm can appear to disappear."

Wolf went for a walk over the world from the Mir Space Station in the late 1990s and saw the Earth seemingly vanish. His recollection so moved New York-based artist Rachel Rose when she heard it on NPR that she went to considerable lengths to track him down for a personal retelling. "I sent handwritten letters, emails and cold-called any source I could find linked to him on the internet. I tried everything for around three or four months. I didn't think I would be able to get to him," she says.

But her pursuit paid off and the ensuing interview forms the spine of Rose's most recent work, which is to debut at the Whitney Museum of American Art's new downtown New York location Thursday. Entitled Rachel Rose: Everything and More, a reference to David Foster Wallace's book about infinity, the exhibition will be the 28-year-old artist's first solo show in a US museum as well as the one of the debut events in the Whitney's emerging artist series, which seeks to bring artists at the start of their careers into the illustrious gallery.

The exhibition follows hot on the heels of the artist's debut in a UK institution (Rachel Rose: Pallisades, at London's Serpentine Gallery until 8 November), as well as an installation she created for the Frieze art fair in London this month after winning its art award. How is she coping with the sudden attention? "Except now, talking to a journalist, I don't really notice it. There are so many things I am working on that are internal that I oddly don't have the energy to, like, *know*," she says. "I am a bit of a workaholic. It's a little obsessive."

Rose's art often deals with the limits of the human body and is tempered with an uneasy, anxious sense of detachment. Her previous work has taken in subjects as diverse as the American revolutionary war, the stultifying lives of zoo animals, holidaymakers hit by a freak hailstorm on a Siberian beach and architect Philip Johnson's Glass House in Connecticut.

Her fixation on the disembodiment astronauts feel in space developed after watching

the movies Gravity and Interstellar. “Regardless of whether those films were good or bad, they put in relief for me the human experience on Earth in a sensorial, physical way,” she says. “I left the theatre feeling a looseness, a detachment from my everyday understanding of the world and how things fit together. I wanted to do something that addressed that powerful feeling, but not through spectacle. How can we get to that place, but through what is grounded here on Earth?”

Her search led her to Wolf’s radio interview. “I heard it and was like: ‘Wow, this is crazy. This is just a person’s voice, which is such a basic thing, but his straightforward telling of the story left me feeling aftershock.’”

Because her interview with Wolf was conducted over the phone, his voice, Rose says, “sounds as though it’s moving through a frequency. I really liked that, and was inspired to develop to this other component which runs throughout the piece.” She took a performance of Aretha Franklin singing in a church and edited it using a spectrograph, an astronomical instrument used to split and analyse light or sound frequencies (Rose’s analogy is to think of a bar code, and then imagine the same strip with most of the lines erased).

She deleted the sounds of the organ, the church and other people to leave just the frequency with the voice. This too has been stripped down, so that you don’t hear the words Franklin is singing, just her tone, and the sound appears to float like a “thing released from humanness, but still human”, Rose says.

The two sounds, Wolf and disembodied Franklin, weave in and out of the work, accompanying visual footage shot mostly in a neutral buoyancy lab in Maryland, or in Rose’s New York apartment. Astronauts used to learn how to walk in space in neutral buoyancy pools of water and Rose says she was “really taken by the fact that something as sublime as moving through space can be learned in something as basic and everyday as water”. Her camera shots move in and out of the water to suggest a similarly amphibious transition.

Meanwhile, the footage recorded in her home focuses on standard kitchen supplies such as milk, oil, water and ink but filmed in microscopic detail under high intensity lights. Rose says she was “looking back at a form of special effects that were more close and personal, like in 2001: A Space Odyssey”.

Preparation for the actual presentation of the work “has been a real physics experiment”, says Christopher Y Lew, the associate curator at the museum in charge of the emerging artists’ initiative. The Whitney’s fifth-floor gallery screening room has floor-to-ceiling windows, usually covered by blinds. Rose has removed the blinds and replaced them with a scrim on which her film will be projected, and through which the city view can be seen. Riffing on the astronaut explorer’s tale of the extreme dark and light in space, Rose intends to marry the light from the video projection with the natural light streaming in, so the viewer feels a sense of oscillation between a virtual space and the real world beyond it.

Rose says the work’s scale is about this light. She wants the projection “to feel big enough that it seems like the room itself is holding the screen, not that the screen is just within the room”. This effect will allow viewers to experience some of the detachment

from their bodies which astronauts must feel when floating above an Earth they can no longer see. “Hopefully, you will experience things as though in outer space,” she says.

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