

# REEL TO REEL

**Rachel Rose** grapples with painting and the garden path

By Wendy Vogel

Portrait by Kristine Larsen

**"I LOVE RESEARCH. GET ME TO A LIBRARY AND LET ME GO wild!"** says Rachel Rose, sitting in the downstairs café of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum the day after the opening of "The Great Acceleration," the latest edition of the Taipei Biennial. The exhibition includes her 2013 video *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* among works by more than 50 artists who examine the Age of the Anthropocene—in other words, our current era, in which human civilization and industrial development have had a devastating impact on nature.

With an unwavering gaze, the 28-year-old New York-based artist mentions a few references that inform her latest video, *A Minute Ago*—including the final scene in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1970 film *Zabriskie Point*, and a mid-concert emotional breakdown by the rapper Big Sean—with an intelligence and lightness of touch that mirrors the pace of her vertiginous videos. Between citations of pop-cultural touch-

stones, she periodically returns to the topic of the 18th-century garden-circuit path as both a theme in her videos and as research for her process. The landscaping technique of creating narrative "episodes" via cultivated nature and objects like pools and statuary, she explains, has been historically linked to the development of plot for the novel and cinema.

Rose's trippy clips embrace cutting-edge techniques from digital rotoscoping to voice modulation while exploring the relationship between nature and culture, cutting their own path between different aesthetic and environmental phenomena. The young artist brings not only a researcher's boundless enthusiasm to her videos but, as a former painter who only recently turned to the medium, an eye unbound by the genre's constraints. "It comes from painting," Rose says about her editing process, adding that the lessons she learned about "motion and stillness and lightness and dark" continue to inform her work. As an





Two stills from  
*Sitting Feeding  
Sleeping*,  
2013. HD video,  
9 min. 49 sec.

undergraduate, Rose studied painting at Yale, then completed a master's degree in art history at London's Courtauld Institute of Art. While living in London, she continued to paint abstract "Rorschach-like" images on transparent panes of Plexiglas. The process foreshadowed her layered video compositions. Shortly after starting the MFA program at Columbia University in 2011, she stopped painting. Unsure of what she would make, she gravitated toward conversation with faculty members like the social-practice superstar Rirkrit Tiravanija, for whom she later worked. Rose began to visit zoos around the country and to conduct marathon research sessions on the topic of death; from there, the subject of her first video began to take form.

*Sitting Feeding Sleeping* switches between intimacy and remove. Just under 10 minutes long, the existential piece tackles evolution, technologically mediated death, and the colonization of nature. When the video was first shown at Rose's graduate thesis exhibition, it was projected on a small screen. Viewers sat on a flesh-toned carpet and listened to the soundtrack on headphones. The work is narrated by the artist's Auto-Tuned voice cycling in and out of the androgynous vocal-fry register. Rose shot footage at zoos, cryogenics facilities, and robotics-perception labs; these images are shown along with screenshots of her desktop and glimpses of canonized figurative paintings. The visual editing is rhythmic, alternating between dreamlike sequences and flickering cuts. Rose remains at a distance in many of the images she captures, particularly in the zoo sequences, analyzing how nature is constructed rather than creating narratives around animals. "Zoos have different voices," Rose says. "For instance, in San Diego the zoo is like an amusement park, whereas in Washington, D.C., it's sort



of a museological natural-history experience. The Bronx Zoo is a little like an ecological preserve." Like the garden circuit, the zoo environment creates an immersive narrative experience. Against this fabric of images, her words become ever more vulnerable as she discusses the invention of technologies that artificially prolong life. In a final sequence of the artist's hands smashing blueberries, her unmodulated voice nearly whispers, "You are made for the mutations you make."

For her next video, *Palisades in Palisades*, 2014, Rose wanted to expand both her conceptual concerns and her cinematographic repertoire. "I was learning how to make a shot in relation to the content," she explains, "and how the shots were metaphors for pure sensual material." The artist accomplished this by using a remote-control camera that could zoom from 200 feet away all the way up to the pores in an individual's skin. She chose to shoot in New Jersey's Palisades Interstate Park, a onetime Revolutionary War battleground turned landscaped circuit park that sits atop an ancient cliff.

In the piece, the point of view zips across the park to a close-up on the body of her friend, a stand-in for Rose, who becomes a cipher linking disparate historical eras and materials. Smooth edits trace a continuous circuit path between the contemporary female figure,

“Zoos have different voices,” says Rose. They can be like amusement parks, natural-history museums, or ecological preserves.

the park and its prehistoric bedrock, and paintings and etchings that depict the Revolutionary War. In one sequence, the camera zooms into the blue fabric of the female protagonist’s sweater, a shade that nearly matches the painted soldier’s velvet sash in the next frame. In another, a dissolve shot seamlessly transitions from her gray coat to the frayed edge of a canvas. A snippet from Nancy Sinatra’s maudlin rendition of “Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)” adds to the gender- and

time-bending effect. “We have this deep, evolutionary physical sense of time; this social, historical sense of time; and then this bodily sense of time,” Rose says of the connections between the Palisades site, the history paintings, and the filmed subject.

*A Minute Ago*, which debuted this fall at High Art gallery in Paris, revolves around rotoscoping, the animation technique Rose calls “collaging in time and space.” Her most impressionistic work to date, the work takes its point of departure from two pieces of footage: a YouTube video of a freak summer hailstorm on a Siberian beach, and a tour given by the architect Philip Johnson of his landmark Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, just a few years before his death at age 98. “I was thinking about the relationship between shocking, catastrophic weather conditions and collage, which has a similar uncanny, suturing quality,” Rose says. Accompanied partly by a down-pitched version of Pink Floyd’s 1971 concert played “to the dead” at Pompeii, the work has an unsettling, morose quality.

The artist treats Johnson as an apparition, pasting a blurred

version of his figure into video she shot this summer at the Glass House. The new footage replicates the lighting conditions and angles in the background of Johnson’s original tour, allowing his ghostly figure to sit “as precisely as possible” in her piece. His spoken tour of the immaculately preserved modernist house contrasts with the shrieks of beachgoers pelted by a sudden storm. Rose montages the two sites together with strobelike flickers and, with the help of a professional compositor, creates

an image of the Glass House splintering into layers of hail-like pixels. The startling image brings to life the old adage about stones and glass houses, hinting at contemporary notions of class, responsibility, and a lack of faith in modernist progress.

Nicolas Poussin’s 1648 *Burial of Phocion*, the only painting on view at the Glass House, figures prominently in the video, and also pixelates into a hailstorm of fragments. “It’s different from what painting often does, because it doesn’t express motion or time,” Rose says of the picture, where even the leaves look perfectly calm. Drawing on T.J. Clark’s analysis in *The Sight of Death* of stillness in Poussin’s oeuvre, Rose explains that the figure who is about to be buried “is infinitely paused,” in a freeze frame or purgatory. The painting, she says, becomes a metaphor for the pristine state of Johnson’s landmark. But in her treatment, the painting, the mausoleum-like quality of glass architecture, and the indolence of a day on the beach are subjected to forces beyond their control.

Unlike in her previous two videos, Rose has removed herself completely from *A Minute Ago*. Yet the video reflects more directly than ever her sensibility as an artist constructing space and analyzing history. Rose’s reading of the Poussin canvas contrasts with Johnson’s, who saw in it a reflection of his own manicured garden path on the grounds of the Glass House. Her works, rather than holding a strict path, show eras of history rubbing against one another and creating fractured narratives. These historic layers operate in the same way the artist describes compositing, as “suturing real to real” rather than a special effect. For this artist, cinema’s past and recent innovations, the history of art and freak weather conditions, are transparent layers of the “real,” to be stitched together and blown apart. **MP**



Two stills from *A Minute Ago*, 2014. HD video, 8 min. 43 sec.

