

Artist Hannah Rickards explores space, motion at EMPAC

Performance examines human search for direction

By Tresca Weinstein Published 11:45 am, Wednesday, September 28, 2016



The artist **Hannah Rickards** is fascinated by the ways we make our mark on nature, and vice versa. In one of her early works, she took passages of bird song and altered them to a pitch at which she could sing them herself. To create "Thunder," she extended a 10-second recording of a single thunderclap to seven minutes and worked with a composer to transcribe it into a musical score for six instruments — which she then recorded and reduced back down to 11 seconds.

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"One can make out the surface only by placing any dark-colored object on the ground" is a performance that uses navigational techniques to choreograph the interaction of a moving camera with two performers. ... [more](#)

Her 2014 work "Grey light. Left and right back, high up, two small windows," is a two-screen video and sound installation structured around the blows of a foghorn, as heard from a community meeting room on Fogo Island in Newfoundland. Featuring performers **Catriona James** and **Ted Schmitz**, the work uses the foghorn as a marker for nonvisibility.

"What has always interested me is this idea of translation, of how we make sense of our surroundings and of natural phenomena," Rickards said in a recent interview. "My work articulates our relationship to these things, and looks at where else in life we can find that."

More Information

If you go

Hannah Rickards: "One can make out the surface only by placing any dark-colored object on the ground"

When: 7 and 8 p.m. Thursday

Where: EMPAC, 110 8th St., Troy

Tickets: \$12; \$10 seniors and RPI faculty and staff; \$6 RPI students

Info: 276-3921; <http://empac.rpi.edu>

Her new work, "One can make out the surface only by placing any dark-colored object on the ground," continues her exploration of the interaction between humans and the natural environment. The culmination of a two-year research and development process and a three-week residency at EMPAC, it will have two showings, at 7 and 8 p.m, on Thursday at the performing arts center.

"In whiteout conditions, when it's hard to differentiate the sky from the ground, the landscape around you

becomes a kind of blank page on which you're putting some kind of mark," Rickards said. "You have to do that in order to know where you are and what the next step is. You're making a decision and then moving on from there"—whether you're navigating through a blizzard, making a drawing or composing music.

The objects that the two performers (James and Schmitz again) use as their guides as they move through the space are images on pieces of paper, many of which Rickards unearthed at the **Scott Polar Research Institute** in Cambridge, England.

"I collected geological images, images from textbooks, photos of Arctic sea ice and early balloon expeditions to the North Pole, early glass negatives of images of Northern Lights," she said. She chose a number of photos that included man-made objects, to give a sense of scale and to highlight the juxtaposition, such as a hammer placed beside a rock or a backpack within a landscape. Often the images were unclear or difficult to decipher—"on the edge of being defined as readable," she said.

Each performer places an image on the ground, steps over it, places another image, and so on, in this way creating the choreography of the work. "The patterns are about trying to avoid a pattern, and not to fall into habitual ways of moving," Rickards said.

"The performers are in a perpetual state of motion and flux; their movement changes from performance to performance."

Meanwhile, a camera suspended on a cable maneuvers throughout the space, weaving between the performers and recording small details — like shadows and gestures — as well as wide aerial shots. "The camera becomes another body in the space," Rickards said. "It's doing what the performers are doing—focusing, searching, and then moving on."

The only score for the work is the sound created by its execution, she said: the mechanical noises of the camera rig, the performers' footsteps, paper being lifted and paper falling to the floor.

"I try to make works that are a container for a kind of attention where the smallest sounds become significant," Rickards said. "In all aspects of life, whether it's politics or relationships or art, we should all just listen a bit more."

Tresca Weinstein is a frequent contributor to the **Times Union**.