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Claudia Schmacke

St. Louis Art Museum | Missouri

For Berlin artist Claudia Schmacke's three-part *Currents* exhibition at St. Louis Art Museum (through July 5), she employed the everyday elements air and water as her materials of choice. Many artists have overlapped the disciplines of art and science. Few, however, have overtly used water to refer to the time-based nature of film, to the image's fleeting nature and propensity for transformation. This current body of work is directly influenced by the artist's research into Leonardo's drawings of the deluge and other hydrological studies, specifically his interest in how water flows around obstacles.

Dark Matters (2009) is conceptually the better of the two videos on display. During a residency in Los Angeles, Schmacke spent time analyzing and filming the La Brea Tar Pits. The result is a large detailed projection of the expansion and explosion of tar bubbles, both encapsulating and drawing the viewer into the roiling landscape. As each bubble swells, a reflected scene is captured on its billowing surface, while the warm orange glow of the camera lights and silhouetted palm trees provide the only trace of color in this bubbling black pool. A series of mesmerizing momentary glimpses of the artist filming the bubbles' mirror-like skin ties neatly into Schmacke's preoccupation with elements of duality. The soundtrack, a series of noises suggesting the experience of being trapped inside these rising air pockets, plays an important role in the visceral digestion of her work.

In the second video, *Umbilicus* (2006), the focus of Schmacke's lens is turned on the escalating use of water. The resulting image simultaneously resembles an empty, drain-like abyss and the interior of a human eye. Accompanied by an unseemly soundtrack, involving electric noises and a continual flushing sound, water salaciously sluices around the hole and its concentric rims, conjuring cycles of hoarding and waste. To its credit, *Umbilicus* is an illuminating complement to her sculptural work, displaying her ability to manipulate or recycle water to materialize her art through and as the trace of its disappearance. The video simultaneously embodies the flow of water and the moving image, showing especially how film most of all structures the passage of time, while further enhancing the idea of the runaway delivery and departure of water. Only the odd dry spell breaks the constant stream of this psychedelic wash.

Located nearby, Schmacke's *Time Reel* (2009) emits an intriguing humming sound, produced by fluorescent green and yellow water racing through sprawling lengths of transparent tubing. The tubes enter and exit the entire wall through a series of symmetrical cavities, inferring either the body's circulatory system or a busy switchboard. The constant ebb and flow results in visual confusion, aided by a hidden mechanical breeze that rhythmically animates the tubes. *Time Reel* is a clever play on commotion and calm, on the visible and invisible. Its kinetic fixation looks back to Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca* (2000), a room-sized machine that operates as a human digestive system, and Tim Hawkinson's massive *Uberorgan* (2000) installation of big plastic balloons and tubing simulating human respiration.

Art like this is at once evocative and self-cannibalizing, devoting as it does its entire substance to the preservation and squandering of the life force. Only time will tell whether Schmacke's waterworks will establish ever-new creative possibilities or become unstable, finishing up, as did Leonardo's, in apocalyptic end-time.

- Dana Turkovic -