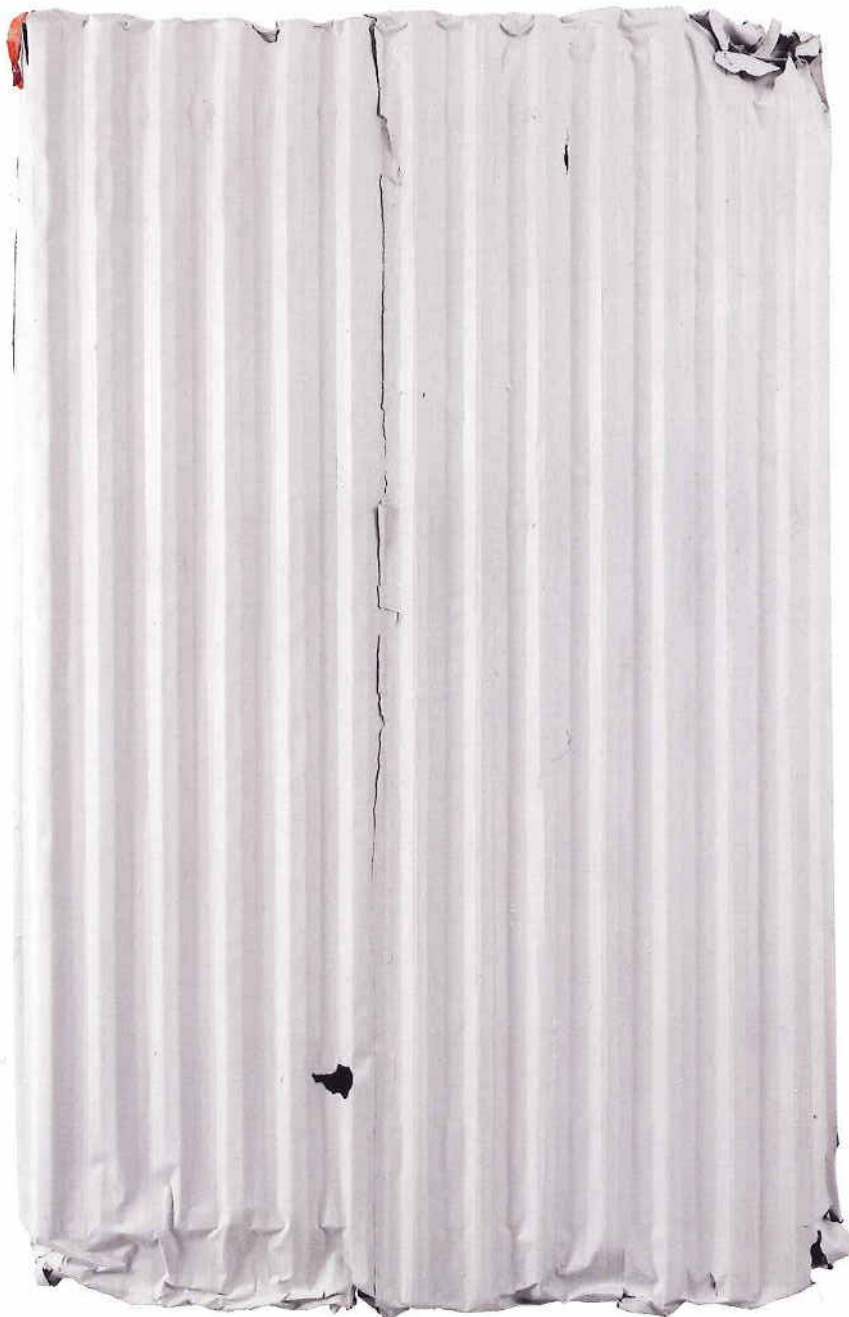


# ARTFORUM

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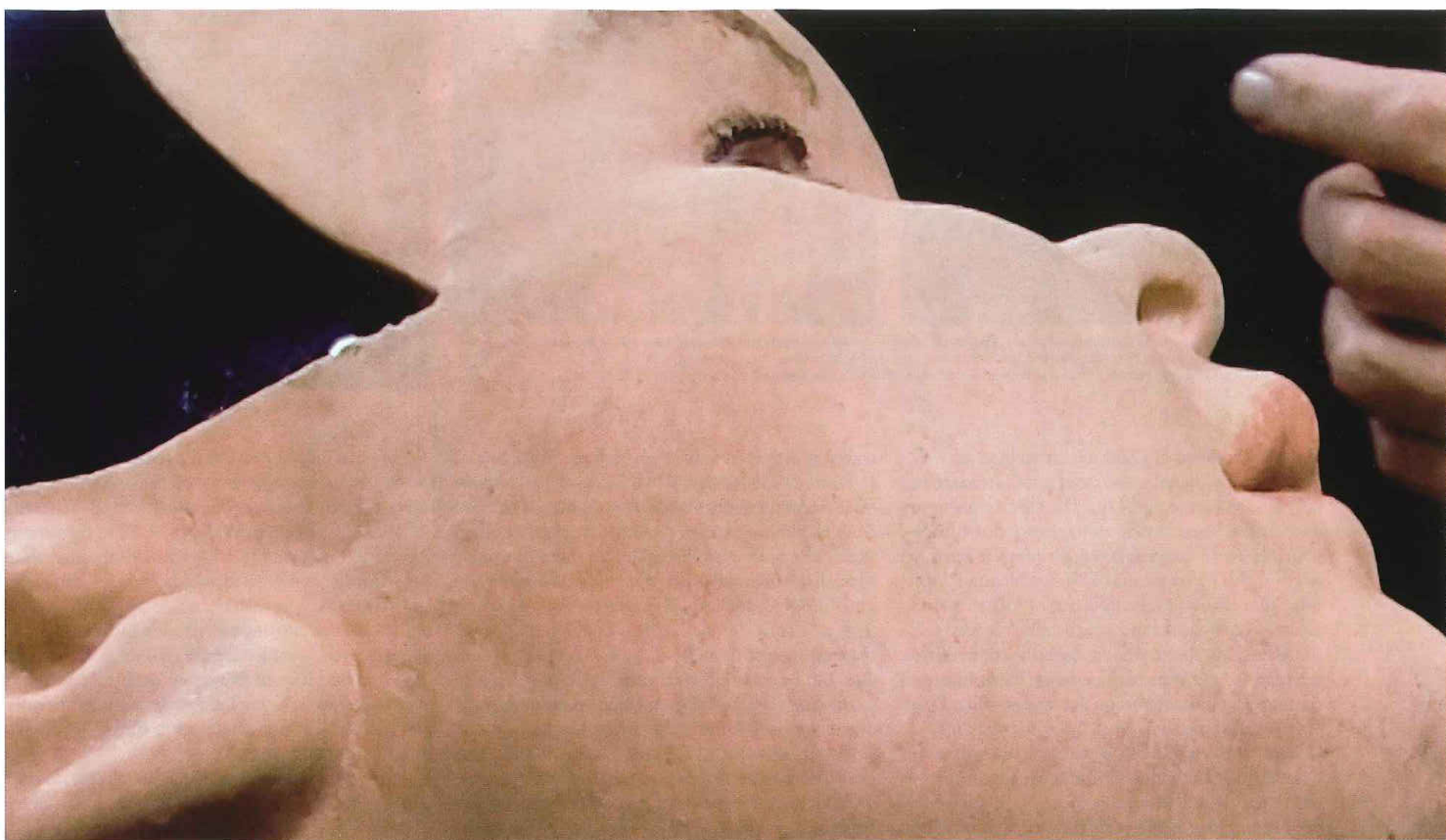
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## OPENINGS

# Rachel Rose

KEVIN MCGARRY

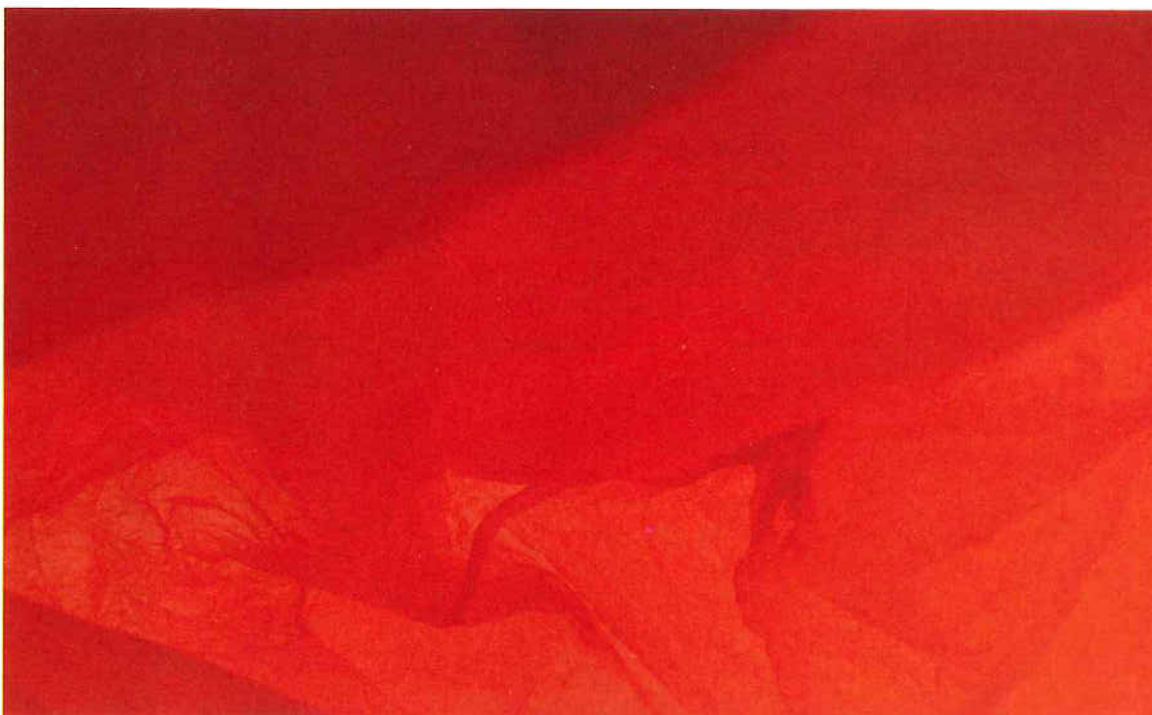
**“THE JUNGLE IS BURNING / Zoo animals would die without you / And the degree to which you being here at the zoo means nothing is strong.”** The convoluted meter of this line from New York-based artist Rachel Rose’s ten-minute video *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, 2013, makes the unevenly Auto-Tuned voice of its speaker seem even more synthetic. If the piece were actually narrated by a computer, I would have zoned out and played with my phone. But rather than Siri’s familiar, stilted affect, this cyborg voice has human inflections. It belongs to Rose, who, despite having finished only three videos to date, has shown a preternatural ability to handle such vast topics as being, time, and death without lapsing into vague portentousness. On the contrary, the works are sensuous and subtle, phasing through discordant styles reinvented for each new project and each set of structural conditions she encounters.

Rose’s ever-changing process is conjoined with her ethic as an artist committed more to discovery than to mastery. Her videos are inarguably technically sophisticated, but they are grounded in homespun improvisations propelled by a rapacious curiosity about the world she lives in and the ways in which that world can (and cannot) be wrought on-screen. She has approached each video as an exercise in learning new production and postproduction technologies—



Left: Rachel Rose, *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, 2013, HD video, color, sound, 9 minutes 49 seconds.

Right: Two stills from Rachel Rose's *Palisades in Palisades*, 2014, HD video, color, sound, 9 minutes 31 seconds.



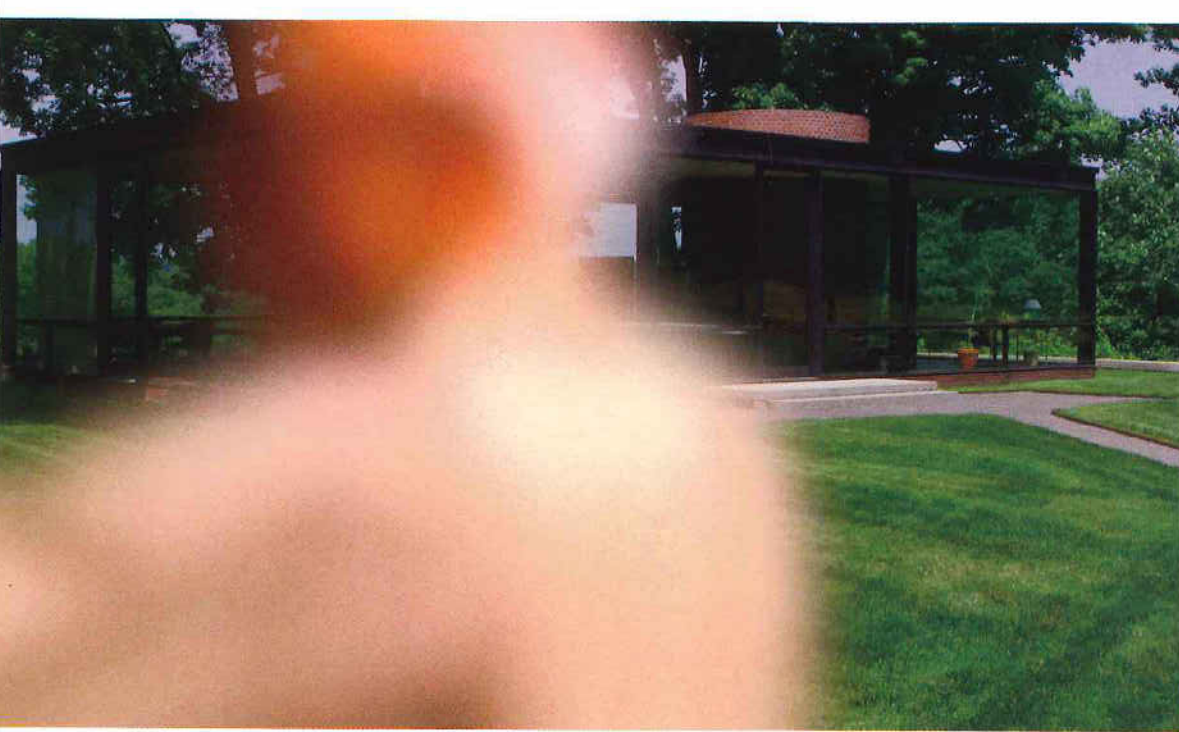
different cameras, lenses, software—that somehow resonate with the conceptual and formal elements of the subject she is investigating.

Grounded in footage shot at a cryogenics lab, a robotics-perception lab, and several zoos, *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* muses about what dying is today, parsing the ways in which technological and cultural shifts have caused death's boundaries to blur such that dying might be mistaken for extended life. Also at stake are more existential questions: If an animal lives longer in captivity, is its condition one of being truly alive? Rose's zoo is more reflective than critical, an observatory in which to wonder deeply about the nature of things.

"Try to stop death," Rose intones. "Deep time is hard to grasp." As this is recited, featureless aquatic organisms (resembling bay leaves more than fish) pirouette on the seafloor to an eerie waltz and flashes

of purple light. The ominous confluence of such epochally incongruous elements as strobe lighting and Precambrian organisms is *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*'s most alien feature. The narration's non sequitur suggests that an insidious diminishing of life may proliferate so stealthily that by the time a surreally random scene such as this one occurs, the observers who remain to witness it, while sen-

tient, may themselves not be alive in a way that we would recognize—consciousnesses without bodies. Eschatology exerts itself on contemporary artists like gravity, for obvious reasons—never have reports of impending apocalypse seemed so credible. In Rose's case, the end of the world is also perhaps the end of sensory experience; it is the point at which the tension her work points up—between the abstractions



Rose is committed more to discovery than to mastery.

of technological structures that cannot be sensorially perceived (on the one hand) and palpable experience (on the other)—is resolved in favor of abstraction.

While Rose's videos recall the cool fusions of uncanny imagery and spoken prose in recent works by a slew of young Londoners—Ed Atkins, Laure Prouvost, Emily Wardill, and Helen Marten, to name a few—her project is less literary, more felt. The mechanics of her filmmaking inspire an overtly embodied reaction in the viewer, linking her to an earlier generation of poststructuralist filmmakers such as Leslie Thornton. There are affinities with the playful, doom-laden treatment of humanity's dependence on technology in Thornton's magnum opus *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1984–2013), and in the contemplation of fauna in her *Binocular Menagerie* (2014). However, the piece that constitutes the most direct lineage is Thornton's 1975 film *X-TRACTS*, which was also made at the beginning of a former painter's career as a filmmaker. Just as the heartbeat pulse of Thornton's edits syncs the film to the rhythms of the human body, Rose's work transforms a symphonic range of imperceptible technical events—electricity running through a current, a microprocessor operating—into suites of palpable, concatenated experiences.

Rose's second video, *Palisades in Palisades*, 2014, collapses history along the banks of the Hudson River. Taking for her film's subject the geologic and political constitution of a cliffside New Jersey park, Rose guided a swooping remote-control camera in



and out of details through hyperbolic *Powers of Ten*-like magnifications: The camera pans vertiginously out from a tight shot of denim fibers to an expansive verdant landscape; in extreme close-up, the texture of an eighteenth-century painting depicting a Revolutionary War battle that transpired on the site melts into an image of living epidermis and a fringe of clumpy blue mascara. The sound track is

lush: the uneasy white noise of tonal whirring, the melancholic lilt of Nancy Sinatra, the tinny twinkle of a batting eye. The accumulation of surfaces, textures, and topographies coalesces as a whirlwind tour of both the transformations compressed into the film's setting and the embodied perception of the viewer who watches them unfurl.

*A Minute Ago*, 2014, Rose's latest work, aligns

Opposite page: Two stills from Rachel Rose's *A Minute Ago*, 2014, HD video, color, sound, 8 minutes 43 seconds.

Right: Two stills from Rachel Rose's *Everything and More* (work in progress), HD video, color, sound, 9 minutes.



the spirit of “deathfulness” evoked in *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* with the rippling of time and space in *Palisades in Palisades*. The video opens on a Russian beach, where a hailstorm swiftly undoes a lovely afternoon, like a biblical plague. With one swish of a cross-fade, we are inside Philip Johnson’s Glass House. Rose rotoscoped archival footage of a blurred Johnson guiding a walk-through of the house into her own crisply defined video of the masterwork, replicating the 1997 tour shot for shot. This scene begins to alternate with one from the hailstorm raging in Novosibirsk. Cue a siren, a drum cadence, and the house is atomized into countless pixels. In a frenetic apogee of montage, the image of a faltering deer is furiously intercut with Nicolas Poussin’s 1648 painting *Burial of Phocion*, the only painting in the Glass House. “It was a [sic] perfect weather a minute ago,” a subtitle reads, just before the maelstrom. Everything dissolves together, apart, and the space in which we are left is a disorienting tangle of order and chaos.

Then there is outer space. Rose’s next project, which will debut at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York on October 30, mines the sublimity of nothingness. Titled *Everything and More*, it takes as its point of departure the account of an astronaut who turned his back on his space station to look at Earth at a moment when only its oceans were before him and—the globe devoid of civilization’s constant glow—saw the planet obliterated.

When I met Rose for the first time in Los Angeles,



we went to a matinee of the existential blockbuster *Interstellar* (2014) in 4DX. Unfortunately, the 4DX theatrical product isn’t always inclusive of 3-D—there were no glasses or light forms encroaching on our depths of field, only trembling seats and occasional gusts of wind synced with on-screen surprises. But Rose was nevertheless fascinated by the film’s most compromised conditions—how director Christopher

Nolan wrought a Hollywood story, pitched to an unfathomably massive global audience, from a similarly unfathomable abstraction, the airless ether of nonlinear time and space. Somehow, the unthinkable morphologies of galaxies and light speed were here manifested in the most resolutely physical, even banal, effects: a vibration, a breeze. □

KEVIN MCGARRY IS A WRITER BASED IN LOS ANGELES.