Christopher K. Ho
Lesbian Mountains in Love

The following interview between Des Moines Art Center Senior Curator Gilbert Vicario and artist Christopher K. Ho took place in June 2011.

GILBERT VICARIO: Although you are not a video artist, per se, you have created a conceptually intriguing work that deals with time, structure, and pacing, using a very popular reference point: the romance novel. Can you give a general description of Lesbian Mountains in Love?

CHRISTOPHER K. HO: Lesbian Mountains in Love is a projection of two mountains side-by-side: Mount Rainier in Washington State and Popocatépetl just outside Mexico City. Depicted in real time, they speak to each other in private, loving tones: “Will you remember to watch for the full moon?” “Every single time.” Before tectonic movement thrust them upward into mountains some 150 million years ago and separated them, their geomorphological boundaries further distanced them, they were once of the same landmass. Nowadays they yearn for reunion in a future Pangaea. The stillness of the frames—quiet but for occasional wind blowing snow off the summits, subtle climatic variations, and cloud movement—bespeaks the vastness of geologic time, and belies the lovers’ task: erosion will surely demarcate them before they converge.

GW: What inspired you to create this split screen love story? Does it come from a love of structuralist filmmaking?

CKH: Structuralist filmmaking certainly informs Lesbian Mountains in Love insofar as its constitutive elements—the split screen, the dialogue’s source (from romance novels), the subtitles, pacing, and even the vector between the viewer’s binocular vision and the doubling of mountains—function in relation to the other elements, the apprehension of which yields a structured and self-contained formal and experiential field. But the piece differs also in several regards, not the least that Lesbian Mountains in Love is a video, not a film (which would not readily allow for a split-screen format). This distinction is key, since the very notion of self-containment is as antithetical to video as it is affinited with structuralist film. If structuralist filmmakers recursively ground their work in the medium of film—for instance Michael Snow’s reflective filming of film’s invariable forward momentum with a continuous zoom in Wavelength—video, in its digitized dispersal, offers no clear underlying support. Its “constitutive heterogeneity,” to use Samuel Weber’s characterization:2 contours any possibility of containment.

Lesbian Mountains in Love resists containment several ways. First, its duration, 43’04”, minutes, is longer than most contemporary art viewer would spend in front of a work. (The few who stay for the video’s entirety may catch the four words of spoken, rather than subtitled, dialogue near the film’s center.) Second, the video invokes a temporal register far greater than that of film, and indeed of any medium: geologic time. The hundreds of millions of years that the mountains, El Popo (outside present-day Mexico City) and Mount Rainier (in Seattle), await tectonic plate movement to reunite them exceed not only the parameters of art and technology, but of humankind, who as a species occupies only a fraction of that time. Lastly, the video focuses on meaning as well as structure: the walking up of emotion, the surfact of pathos, the animating and anthropomorphizing of that which seems inanimate. In these ways, it opens up tenses beyond that of structuralist film: emotive as well as formal, ecological as well as phenomenalistic, existent as well as structural.

In this sense, the split-screen format plays a double role. As you suggest, it nods towards structuralist film. It also references the bilateral symmetry of a human face, which allows us as viewers to project onto the mountains emotions and problems that are our own, thus generating meaning.

GW: Can you talk a little about the time segment spacing between the dialogue (subtitled) and American composer John Cage? Or does this relate to music composition more generally?

CKH: There are seven segments of dialogue; each excerpted from one of another. Likewise, romance, in all its multifarious complications might present a third term.

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The coincidence of a contemporary writer of popular fiction and a revered avant-garde composer is purposeful, even polemical. At its most simplified, Cage shifted focus from work to context. Nuances aside, this shift’s ramifications remain deeply felt in artistic production today in the conundrum binary sets it implied: object/frame, autonomy/intermixture, high art/everyday, event/incident. I was interested in third terms that transcend these now-ossified binaries. Fiction is one such term. It approaches content as context and vice versa, and thus sidesteps the necessity of choosing one term or another. Likewise, romance, in all its multifarious complications might present a third term.

GW: How does this piece fit within your overall artistic philosophy?

CKH: I am interested in dismantling art’s outer limits of possibility, a process that necessarily entails multiple projects of diverse mediums. It is my hope that in retrospection, my body of work will constitute a ‘map’ of contemporary art. Whether this happens or not, or if such a map is legible or not, is to be determined. Even more complicated is that while art’s limits of possibility are historically determined, it is constantly evokes; as curator Kelly Baum recently observed, the project of contemporary art is precisely to “install difference, non-identity, and externality.”

On that hypothetical map, Lesbian Mountains in Love occupied the territory that focused on time, a leitmotif in art since the 1960s at least, and one which figures deeply in my recent work. Further, Lesbian Mountains in Love addressed a particular historical problem. I finished editing Lesbian Mountains in Love at the tail end of 2008, a year in which the shortcomings of institutional critical art, which privileged operations like subversion and social transformation, became starkly plain. Endogenously, that particular artistic trajectory had run its course, and become somewhat academic. Exogenously, the economic downturn pressured the anti-capitalist precepts of institutional critique. Why critique that which was falling, that which was already down?

Lesbian Mountains in Love preserved the political component of traditional institutional critique (in its anti-capitalist precepts), but not necessarily its end goals. The recourse to landscape was a way of fingerling a problem that unified, rather than divided, people. It underscores human-kind’s commonality in face of something that seems familiar (mountains) but in fact radically alien: El Popo and Mt Rainier predate any politics of ours, but in fact radically alien: El Popo and Mt Rainier predate any politics of ours, and will surely outlive human-kind as a species. They will themselves be subject to even greater forces like erosion, and live through several other ice ages, the last of which will become permanent when the sun extinguishes. How does taking this long perspective alter and inform our notions of the political?

GILBERT VICARIO | SENIOR CURATOR

1 Weber quoted in Rosalind Krauss, A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), Section X of Krauss’s long essay succinctly distinguishes structuralist film and video.

2 Kelly Baum, “A Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’: 32 Responses,” October 130 (MIT Fall 2009), 96.
Christopher K. Ho

Biography
Born 1974, Hong Kong
Lives and works in New York, NY

Solo Exhibitions and Project Rooms
2010 Regional Painting, Winkleman Gallery, New York
Like Death, New Mexico Will Catch up with You in the End, Fish Eye Press, Santa Fe, NM (with Karen Zucker)
2009 El In Arcadia Ego, Galeria EDS, Mexico City
2008 Happy Birthday, Winkleman Gallery, New York

Group Exhibitions
2011 Rag Day, Isilo Art Museum, MA
2010 The Pavilion of Realism, Other Gallery, Shanghai
Indelible Interferences, Momenta, New York
Seedlings, Dallas Contemporary, TX
Room Without a View, Freies Museum, Berlin
2009 Incheon Biennale, Incheon, Korea
2008 Phantom Limbs, 173 Canal, New York
Never Late Than Better, Elizabeth Foundation (EFA), New York
Solution, DiverseWorks, Houston, TX
2008 Busan Biennale, APEC Park, Busan, Korea
Cultivate, MAMBO at the Barksdale Botanical Gardens, Stockbridge, MA
Estaciones, MAMCO, Mexico City
Landscape as Lithus, Museum of Contemporary Art, Republic of Srpska
Metro Pikes, Culture in Action, The Jamaica Center for Arts & Learning, New York
2008 Chinese Biennale, Chinese Base and Huai Tie Museum, Beijing, China
2007 The Shape of Things to Come, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York
JamaicaFlux, The Jamaica Center for Arts & Learning, New York
Art Cleveland, Rainberger Galleries, Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH
Ceci n’est pas…, Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York
Latitudes, Fieldgate Gallery, London
2006 8 x 8 x 8: NYC/MSP/LON, The Soap Factory, Minneapolis, MN
2005 New York Elevation Blues, Asian American Arts Centre, NY
Sculpture 2005, Francoeur Sculpture Park, Minneapolis, MN
2004 Sunrise Sunset, Smack Mellon, New York
Freeland, Marvel Lab, New York
2003 Float, Socates Sculpture Park, New York
2002 Microviews, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council at the Municipal Art Society, NY
2001 Crossing the Line, Queens Museum, New York

Awards and Honors
2011 NYC Percent for Art Award for permanent public sculpture at Governors Island
2010 Cranbrook Art Academy, Critical Studies Fellowship, Fall 2010
Anderson Ranch, Colorado, Artist-in-Residence
2009 Joan Mitchell Foundation, sculpture grant nominee
NYC Percent for Art Award for permanent public sculpture at PS 585 in Maspeth, Queens
2008 Jackson Hole Hole Art Association, Wyoming, Artist Residency
2007 PILOT, nominees
2005 Jerome Foundation, Grants and Artist Residency at Franconia Sculpture Park
2004 Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Residency

Selected Bibliography
2010 Critic’s Picks, Nuit Banai, artforum.com, December
Christopher K. Ho at Winkleman Gallery, Sara Reisman, ...might be good by Fluent Collaborative
Solo Identity, Marco Antonio, BMM, Winter
Painting Real Fiction, Stephen Truax, Hypersphere, 16 December
Network and Float, Essays by Heng-Gil Han
2009 Solution at DiverseWorks, John Davene, Artlies 62, Summer
Solution at DiverseWorks, Kurt Mueller, Art Papers, May/June
2008 Christopher K. Ho at Winkleman, Gary Indiana, Art in America, May
2007 Many Happy Returns, Nuit Banai, Happy Birthday exhibition catalogue
2006 Welcome to Fantasy Island: Christopher Ho and Troy Richards, Nicolas WSalt, NY Arts, November – December
& Leisure, USELESS Magazine 46, Fall
Ceci n’est pas…, Nuit Banai, Time Out New York, 9-15 August
Ceci n’est pas…, Holland Cotter, New York Times, Friday, 3 August
2002 From Photos to Relics, Remembering the Unforgettable, Roberta Smith, New York Times, Friday, September 6
2001 Queens Speed: Crossing the Line, Anne War, Time Out New York, August 16
2000 Stalking Glances, Karen E. Jones, Time Out New York, May 4

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08/05/2011 – 10/30/2011

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