

# FLOATING WORLDS

## Amy Jenkins's Dream Videos

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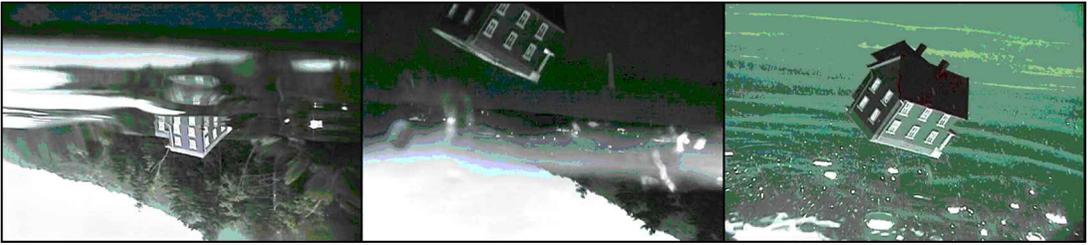
Amy Jenkins, *Shelter for Daydreaming*, Julia Friedman Gallery, Chicago, October 19–December 1, 2001.

Some years ago I read of a wealthy man who had had a television installed directly over his bed, facing downward on a motorized platform, so that he could alter its distance from him by remote control. The self-indulgent decadence of this arrangement suggests a desire to create a cocoon-like space perfectly wedded to one's momentary desires, in which, presumably aided by channel flipping through commercial TV, not the slightest effort, either physical or intellectual, need be expended.

In *Without*, one of the two video installations Amy Jenkins exhibited at Julia Friedman Gallery in Chicago, two mats in a darkened enclosure encourage viewers to lie on the floor, facing a video image projected on the ceiling. The image, which shows clouds apparently reflected on water with tiny human figures floating in the foreground, initially seems restful and soothing, and the apparent two-viewer limitation, with its suggestion of a couple, is seductively intimate. But while Jenkins hopes her piece will be “mesmerizing,” it also

challenges the viewer's tendency to drift into blank complacency, for the imagery is fraught with ambiguity and undermined by a feeling of precariousness.

The viewer is first faced with figuring out what the image actually shows. The notion that it's reflected clouds is contradicted by several cues: the figures seem to be floating slowly and weightlessly, and the tiny drops that appear on the surface are convex rather than concave. In fact, the image was taken underwater, looking up through the surface of a pond at the sky. The sound track, which consists of mostly muffled voices that are sometimes recognizable, contributes as well: a drone of garbled words is interrupted by moments of recognizable phrases, the most prominent being the query, “Are you all right?”—which the installation seems to direct at the supine and immersed viewer, even though the speaker was engaged in a conversation. The voices were in fact culled by Jenkins from tapes that her grandfather made in the 1960s of family members talking, but they don't seem to function autobio-



*Shelter for Daydreaming.* Photos: Courtesy of the artist.



*Without.* Photos: Courtesy of the artist.

graphically here; rather, they add the ambience of chit-chat in a crowded room. The particular kind of muffling Jenkins uses reminded me of the childhood experience of trying to listen through a wall to adults talking: one catches phrases, but the whole is incomprehensible.

What makes *Without* so compelling is the way it wedges the perceptual and the psychological. Like much modernist art, the piece puts the status of its perceived elements into question and is partly about the viewer's process of trying to unpack its ambiguities of image and sound. Lying down while looking up, one finds that the installation mirrors the image itself: both place one in a vulnerable position, with the body exposed to the "elements" (water, sky, figures, the whole video image) above, which helps foreground self-awareness of the viewing process.

At the same time, the weightless effect of the figures floating through water combines with the way surface waves cause the cloud reflections to gently waver, so that the sky image is constantly undulating and warping. The result is a sense of drifting suspension that is, like the piece as a whole, both soothing and, because of instabilities of the space and image, a bit frightening. The human figure is cut adrift in a weightless underwater world, sometimes falling towards us, as if from the clouds, and sometimes moving away, as if rising towards the heavens. Mostly shadowed due to the backlighting, the figures have a mysterious iconic power. Rising and falling, they suggest cycles of death and rebirth. But these figures are also miniatures, toys, making the clouds the most substantive part of the real world that

we can see, but they in turn are spectral apparitions whose shape changes as constantly as water ripples.

The complex of emotions engendered here reminded me of Freud's account, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, of dreams "in which one flies with a feeling of ease or falls in terror . . . they refer to the games involving rapid motion which have such an extraordinary attraction for children. Where is the uncle who has never made a child fly by running with it across the room with outstretched arms, or has never played at falling with it by rocking it on his knee and then suddenly straightening his leg, or by lifting it above his head and suddenly pretending to withdraw his supporting hand? . . . the exciting games of childhood are repeated in dreams of flying, falling, reeling and the like, but the voluptuous feelings are now transformed into anxiety."

Jenkins's earlier installations, which often included images of herself or a lover projected on miniature objects such as a bed or a toilet, had an explicitly psychological dimension, she acknowledges, and the anxiety-inducing elements of *Without* are consistent with her process in making it. The video's twelve-minute length contains several long takes connected by dissolves; Jenkins shot it underwater but without any breathing equipment, so the length of each take was determined by how long she could hold her breath. Similarly, natural bodies of water were once a locus of anxiety for Jenkins, who had only "flopped around in a pool" until 1998, when she began to swim in the same New Hampshire pond where she shot her recent videos. Jenkins also associates the mats in *Without* with a yoga position called

the “corpse pose” which involves lying down in a position similar to what the mats encourage. She associates the clouds with a statement by one of her yoga teachers “that if you’re trying to clear your mind, you can imagine a sky and that each cloud in the sky is a thought. If you don’t cling to any one thought, the cloud will just kind of pass by. What you’re trying to achieve is like an empty blue sky, a sort of alert non thought.”

The other piece at Friedman, *Shelter for Daydreaming*, takes its title from Gaston Bachelard’s book, *The Poetics of Space*, which Jenkins read on the recommendation of someone who knew her work. This piece consists of two different images, each a single take about four minutes long, projected on opposite sites of a hanging wall (Jenkins refers to that wall as “floating”). At Friedman, there wasn’t enough space to present it in the manner Jenkins prefers, which is that the entering spectator faces the four-inch-thick butt side of the wall directly through the doorway so that the decision of which image to view first would in no way be favored. Still, once the viewer has spent enough time to efface the memory of the side first seen, the two images seem neatly balanced, both echoes of each other and opposites too.

One shows the interior of a house from a position behind a wall dividing the entry hall from a parlor. Jenkins’s camera dances back and forth between the two rooms, “trying,” she says, “to physically imitate the rocking sensation of a boat”; the wall serves as a kind of centering point to which the camera always seems to return. A slightly scary creaking sound, suggesting exaggerated floor creaks or an old door that hardly

turns on its hinges, is heard through speakers. The other side shows a line of water with a miniature house floating on it, apparently right side up. But when the waterline occasionally rises due to a wave, below, an upside-down landscape tells us that this image was shot upside-down underwater, where the house was floating upside-down. Accompanying this side are bubbly, underwater sounds.

Once again there’s a compelling mix of psychological expression and viewer engagement, and once again the form of the installation echoes the structure of the image. Each contains, with the dividing wall or water line, a division between two halves like that embodied in the wall, and like the viewer, the camera never settles on one side or the other. The selections that all viewers have to make in encountering almost any art work are made explicit here, but rather than encouraging a final choice, the balanced divisions and the rocking motions of camera and waves place the viewer in a kind of suspended, almost oceanic, state. Water and weightlessness and boundaries and their effacement are once again evoked, and Jenkins’s statement on this piece could apply equally well to *Without*: “As if in a daydream, the fluid movement of the video is mesmerizing and meditative, yet also unstable and precarious . . . [it] invokes the netherworld of ‘In-Betweenness’: to be without origin, floating somewhere between the solid and the fluid.”

Among Jenkins’s earliest and most influential childhood art experiences were the visits she made to the Art Institute of Chicago’s Thorne Rooms, miniature architectural interiors in different styles,

and her use of miniatures here—the purchased human figures in *Without*, and the miniature house she constructed from a kit in *Shelter for Daydreaming*—also bring back magical doll-house invocations of the human presence. But more significant is Jenkins’s mix of dreamlike unconsciousness and intelligent engagement. Poised at the edge of envelopment and obliteration, the viewer is also engaged in a self-aware inquiry into the nature of the aesthetic encounter.

Jenkins’s roots are in still photography, and before concentrating on installa-

tions she began making photographs using stills shown on video monitors within staged scenes. For one group, the *Telerotic* series, she placed a monitor with an eye looking out within photographs of herself and her boyfriend embracing. Behind the apparent humor was an interest in the way images can be more than windows, even their opposite—seeming to look back at the observer. By doubling her image structures in her two installations’ designs, she creates a feeling that the installation “knows” that you’re there, that the artist is somehow looking back at you.

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