

Frieze

Reviews /

Gary Hill



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Galleria Lia Rumma, Milan, Italy



'Gary Hill. Depth Charge', 2015, exhibition view

On the night of the opening, the entrance gate in front of Lia Rumma's gallery building remained locked until seven o'clock sharp. Then, suddenly, the sound of an approaching helicopter could be heard, and a section of the gallery's white facade became a screen, lit up by Gary Hill's computer-generated HD film *Isolation Tank* (2010–11). Mimicking the perspective of a helicopter, the animation's virtual camera scans an ocean, before zooming in on a surfboard decorated with an elaborate decal of a face. When the camera zooms out, we see a giant wave rise up, creating a rushing tunnel of water that submerges everything. The 'helicopter' and surfboard both then

resurface, with the camera hovering over the board for a few moments before flying away, leaving it adrift on the endless sea. Silence. Repeat. The outdoor projection ran only for a few hours, like a trippy apparition. The image on the surfboard – the press release informed us – was both a self-portrait of the artist and ‘the image of a Mahakala (a protector of Dharma in Tibetan Buddhism [...] represent[ing] the death of the ego).’

Myriad possible associations came to mind, with the age-old allegory of the sea of life coming to mind, as well as the hypothesis of quantum mechanics that all matter behaves like a wave. But, above all, I thought of Thomas Pynchon’s novel *Inherent Vice* (2009), the 2014 film adaptation of which (by Paul Thomas Anderson) I had just seen. Its perennially stoned protagonist, Doc, occasionally sees the light: ‘Yet there is no avoiding time, the sea of time, the sea of memory and forgetfulness, the years of promise, gone and unrecoverable ...’

Hill is a tireless explorer of phenomenology, as much as he is a self-confessed fan of both surfing and mind-expanding substances. In 2011, he titled his exhibition at Gladstone Gallery in New York ‘of surf, death, tropes & tableaux: The Psychedelic Gedankenexperiment’. The exhibition at Lia Rumma included enough breaking waves, Socratic irony and ecstatic stupor to nurture the same themes of altered perception and experimental communication. From the late 1960s onwards, with the help of every new technology he has been able to get hold of, Hill has used the human voice as the primary interface with the electronic/digital machine, staging amazing short circuits between perception and thought.

The ground-floor space was left empty except for three full-height wall projections showing footage of a camera fastened to a remote-controlled device mapping the floor of the artist’s studio in Seattle (*Choir Box*, 2015). Whenever the camera hit a wall, a ghostly choir ascended in pitch; when it moved away, the pitch decreased. Just as in Hill’s famous *Wall Piece* (2000), in which we see the artist repeatedly throwing himself against a wall uttering a single word each time, in *Choir Box* the physical barrier impacts on the voice, producing ripples of claustrophobia. The voices seem to scream in frustration in the face of our inability to think and move outside the ‘box’ of reality. When Niels Bohr died, the image found on the blackboard of his office was a diagram of the ‘thought experiment’ proposed to him by Albert Einstein decades earlier: that of a box full of light, to be weighed before and after a single proton had been allowed to escape from it.

On the first floor, Hill continued to tackle physics and the undulating structure of reality with *Klein Bottle* (2014). The neck of this 'non-orientable object', akin to a glass laboratory flask, has been bent over and made to penetrate its base, thus creating an infinite loop in the manner of a Möbius strip (a video of the making of this piece, projected inside its base, reinforces the tautology). Nearby was *Learning Curve (Still Point, 1993)*, a student's chair with a five-metre, triangular desk that expands outwards from the viewer to a tiny monitor placed at its far end that shows silent footage of an endlessly breaking wave.

The second floor of the gallery – the final section of the exhibition – was immersed in darkness and music. *Pacifier* is a triptych of HD displays installed vertically, displaying, to the sound of a descending Shepard tone, the slow-motion fall of a glass model of Little Boy – the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima – until it hits the ground and explodes into myriad fragments. Nearby, Hill positioned *Depth Charge* (2009–12), the mixed-media installation that lent the exhibition its title. Here, the musician Bill Frisell played the hypnotic progressions of Edgard Varèse's *Un Grand Sommeil Noir (A Deep Black Sleep, 1906)* on electric guitar, while his body was projected onto the wall as a series of abstract blue elevations that gave the illusion of being three-dimensional profiles. On the floor, a circle of tilted monitors showed Hill lying on the floor after taking LSD, in broken conversation with his wife Magdalena. We hear him whisper: 'Space, I don't care what it is', 'But this is real', 'I don't have the foggiest inclination', 'Let's just call it love.' It's hard not to love The Dude, man.

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