

Mirrors and reflection at the ICA at MECA

By Nicholas Schroeder February 1, 2011

It was long before Lacan that the mirror metaphor became the foundation of Western subjectivity. Mirrors are simple objects that give us access to some pretty deep realms, thereby enabling some of the richest, ripest, most relatable metaphors. The hall of mirrors presently at the ICA contain four distinct approaches: the uncanny (Daniel Rozin), the mythological (Susan Leopold), the multiple or fragmented whole (Alyson Shotz), and the sudden, violent irruption (Gwenaël Bélanger).

Fittingly, this show begins demanding a close reflection. "Le Tournis (dizzy)," Bélanger's recursive video, is a stunning montage of collated digital frames where several distinct mirrors crash to the floor. Bélanger splices the footage so that the crashes occur in a tight, interwoven sequence, an impressively original work of sound and vision that shatters whatever precepts we may bring to a high art show about mirrors. The visual contains an additional play on the concept: the two-plus minutes it takes to watch Bélanger's video situates its viewer in full view of passersby on one of the busiest sections of Congress Street. From outside of course, the video's sound loop is inaudible; the viewer is being viewed in what appears to be an indecipherable exchange.



FORTRESS OF THIN GLASS Alyson Shotz's "Luminous Harmonic."

"Arnolfini 360 Degrees x 12," Alyson Shotz's garden of metallic convexities affixed to the front gallery's corner, leaves us grappling with our image reflected manifold, as in a fun-house. It exposes to us both silliness and vanity; though there is no hidden trick at play beyond the 12 fish-eye planes. Because we're still unmistakably in public view, Shotz's work so arouses our sense of self-awareness that we're put in a state of minor arrest, like in a sort of fishbowl. As a result, any gesture made at this strange portal feels artificially magnified. It's a challenge to resist fixing your hair.

Making use of some impressive technology, the experience of Daniel Rozin's material mirrors summon some of the most uncanny moments in the recent history of Portland contemporary art. The abyssal "Snow Mirror" exhibit invites its audience into silence and stillness, a welcome habitat after the clangorous sounds on loop in the front gallery. Here, Rozin reminds us that self-reflection is best achieved with stillness and solitude. It is only after five motionless seconds observing Rozin's giant video screen of drifting bits of metallic static that we realize our own image is being softly burned into it.

Our defenses lulled by the quiet snow, things begin to get truly creepy. Across the way, "Peg Mirror" is an assemblage of 650 wooden dowels collected in a wall-mounted circular frame with the pupil of a video camera at its center. Stepping into the camera's view, "Peg Mirror" suddenly comes lurching to life, its motorized pieces — varnished, with tips whittled and planed to achieve depth and shadow — spin to present a facsimile of our outline. The "image" reflected back at us is all featureless contour, but the truly uncanny element is an auditory one. Each peg seems to be stuffed with a substance — like hard rice in a rain stick — that gives each of our tiniest movements an organically audible representation, a vaguely insectile musicality above the motorized whir. It's the loosest definition of a mirror in the exhibition, but it feels profoundly, unnervingly alive.

"Castles and Untold Stories" shows renowned illustrator Susan Leopold using mirrors to explore untapped mythologies. She mounts photographs of remote shelters and crumbling forts into wall dioramas. In each, an inclined mirroring effect projects a symmetrical image of the structure — its staircases broadened and spires nobly doubled; an illusion of largesse that transforms a post-industrial wreckage into something out of Tolkien.

The back room returns to the fun of breaking glass. Bélanger augments the ecstasies of bad luck explored in his video with "Carre Gris," a triptych of photographs documenting moments where his mirrors disarticulate into the floor, while Shotz's "Luminous Harmonic" appears as a fractious and majestic fortress of thin mirrors. And it's impossible to leave without waking "Weave Mirror," one of Rozin's two other marvelous pieces, the animated slithering of which rattles our concepts of identity and subjectivity long after we leave the building.