

## *In Search of Lost Time*



*A new contemporary art exhibit explores the humble but vital elements of human life that are becoming all too rare in our distraction-prone digital world: stillness, solitude, and the solidity of time itself.*

I got the idea for how to start this review when I was supposed to be praying.

I try to "do" ten minutes a day of contemplative prayer, kneeling and opening my mind and heart to whatever God wants to say to me: shedding my own opinions and judgments, turning away from all screens and distractions. It turns out to be a great way to get ideas for my writing. Not such a great way to surrender to silence and inner peace. The distractions are coming from inside the house!

"Days of Endless Time," at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC, through April 6, is an exhibit for our age of bite-sized meditation and distractions on tap. There are only 14 pieces in the show, but all of them require not only our attention but our time. In an ordinary exhibit of paintings or sculptures the viewer controls her time, giving each work the amount she feels it deserves—or the amount of time she can stand to lose with it. In "Days," each video (and one real-life moving display) takes a certain amount of time to complete, and in order to experience it fully, the viewer needs to give it the time demanded by the artist. The museum is explicit about its purpose: to force us into a more mindful, less efficient experience of art and time.

The first and last pieces in the show struck me as the most successful at achieving this purpose. Su-Mei Tse's "L'Echo" shows the artist seated on a grassy expanse in front of the slate-blue Alps, playing a cello. We hear the sounds of her music on a delay (hence the title), so the bowing doesn't match up with the music. Other than this distortion of time, there are no tricks—just the fairy-tale primary colors of the woman in a red dress, the meadow, and the mountains.

Tse sits so still that at times the video feels more like a painting—but then she twitches, or lifts her bow. And even the times of stillness are charged with suspense, since we know that she could move at any moment.

This is one of the longest videos in the show, and it sets a mood of mingled tension and surrender: the tension of awaiting the next sharp, low cry from the cello, and the surrender we feel in the face of the immense Alps. Singing in solitude, in the presence of something vastly greater than ourselves: It's not a bad depiction of contemplation, and it provokes what it depicts.

Right after this we get some silliness. Sigalit Landau's 2005 "DeadSee" has all the hallmarks of overthought political art: the puns, the nudity, the... watermelons? We watch the artist's naked body cling to an unraveling spiral of floating watermelons, some of which are gashed, which the wall caption tells us is meant to represent something about conflicts in the Middle East. Landau forms a graceful arc with her body, but punny political watermelon mandalas are a tough genre.

A better conceptual work, with more specific and poetically expressed cultural criticism, is Siebren Versteeg's "Neither There Nor There." This piece shows two moving images of the artist in that characteristic contemporary pose, hunched over his phone. But the images are connected by what look like streams of dark grit, which flow from one image to the other. The artwork turns out to be a sort of double hourglass: One image is constantly being drained to feed the other, which, in turn, is drained and fed back to the first. The artist is constantly dissolving and re-forming, never fully present. It's a sharp bit of moralizing.

While technology is called into question in this show, nature is exalted. Douglas Gordon's "Play Dead; Real Time" shows a baby elephant performing a circus trick in an empty white gallery space. We get a close view of her wrinkly skin and giant eyes, on multiple big screens. Eija-Liisa Ahtila's "Horizontal" uses multiple cameras and screens to capture the entirety of a massive spruce, from the thick stillness of its base to the wind-tossed top branches. It's displayed horizontally, as the title suggests. This allows the whole tree to fit into the gallery, and also allows us to experience the contrast we always miss from our position on the ground, between the immobile rootedness at the bottom and the constant motion at the top. The soundtrack is all natural, just birds and wind. Guido van der Werve's "The Day I Didn't Turn With the World" takes us to the North Pole, where the artist spent a full 24 hours standing upright, turning every few seconds, to counteract the earth's rotation. This grueling day was compressed into eight minutes and forty seconds, so the images are twitchy and shivery, with rushing clouds and crisp, shifting shadows. Van der Werve also composed the soundtrack, a gentle, slightly ominous piano piece with thunder-like rumbling in the background.

David Claerbout's "Travel" follows a Grimm Brothers-esque path into the woods. It opens and closes strongly, but the exploration of the woods in the middle is rotely meditative. Plashing streams, sun-dappled trees, gentle music: Too much of this film reminded me of those YouTube videos with titles like "Calming Sounds." The fairy-tale element of "Travel"'s opening recurs in other works, especially Hans-Peter Feldman's "Shadowplay." This touching little piece is the only non-filmed work in the show. It's a long table covered with lamps and revolving platforms laid with children's toys and household items: a duck riding a bicycle, a hairbrush, a toy gun, a miniature Eiffel Tower, half a cow. The revolving shadows on the wall create a bedtime-story atmosphere, a slightly eerie tribute to imagination and to the tender remembrance of intimate times between parents and children.

There's a similar spookiness to Clemens von Wedemeyer's "Afterimage," in which a curved screen shows a tour through a warehouse of theatrical properties from the film studio Cinecittà. Crucifixes, a Buddha, a hangman's noose, Aladdin's lamp, and a copy of Michelangelo's David all jumble together. I overheard some security guards discussing their dislike of this work, which they found "creepy."

One of the most striking works oddly undermines the show's purpose. Hans Op de Beeck's "Singing Silence" is a terrific video in which two men—we only see their hands—create and dismantle a score of different environments on a little stage. They use both repurposed objects (a cheese grater becomes a futuristic building in a foggy noir city) and specially made sets. The film begins with the two of them smoking a cigarette and sharing a thermos of coffee: A conversation between friends can contain worlds.

It's a clever, enchanting film, perfect for children: A massive building turns out to be a birthday cake, and when the cake is partly carved and eaten, its crumbly remains are turned into ancient ruins. There are handmade cloud-banks and homemade rain. The music is a confection of chimes, electronic bleep-bloop noises, horns, and piano, perfectly timed.

"Singing Silence" provokes laughter and wonder, leaving you eager to see what they'll come up with next. What it does not provoke is contemplation. The scene is constantly changing, so there's never a need for patience. In the context of a show about learning to be present to the moment, the piece almost seemed like a series of what

Alcoholics Anonymous calls “geographicals”: the attempt to flee from the self and its problems by switching locations, changing one’s surroundings. This isn’t a criticism—the piece is witty and joyful—but it’s noteworthy that many of the pieces in this show actually use a lot of movement, roving cameras and scene changes, as if they’re afraid of losing our attention.

During many of these pieces I caught myself feeling as if I was watching a well-crafted opening-credits sequence. The office scenes of “Singing Silence” would be perfect for a workplace comedy; “Shadowplay” would of course be a spooky children’s movie in the tradition of *The Witches* or *Labyrinth*. The title sequence is one of the few places in pop culture where we’re encouraged to sit with a slow unfolding of images, which as yet have no obvious narrative. Title sequences introduce us to a place and a mood, rather than a plot. They are all potential, without the judgments, regrets, and second-guessing that come with action.

So perhaps “Days of Endless Time” offers an opportunity to experience the world around us as if it’s more than the backdrop for our own narrative, in which we are the hero or villain and what matters most is not the setting but our actions and choices. The Hirshhorn may help us see our surroundings as filled with potential and mystery.

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The last film in the show is the perfect closer. Claerbout returns with “Rocking Chair,” which simply shows an old woman on her sunlit porch in a rocking chair. She seems bored—she’s slumped over—but she’s the opposite of Versteeg’s dissolving man. She’s implacably present.