

Piercing The Clouds

Reflected surfaces in art have a long history. From the illusionistic trope of showing the painting's subject from more than one viewpoint -- as with many of Jan Vermeer's seventeenth-century paintings -- to the inclusion of the artist within the picture -- as in early twentieth-century photographer Eugene Atget's shop windows -- the reflections of mirrors, glass and the like have been used to expand the field of vision beyond a single viewpoint. In the mid and late 1960s the video camera became a mirror of sorts, reflecting the artist and/or viewer back at him via the monitor as in Bruce Nauman's *Performance Corridor* (1968-70) and in Dieter Froese's *Not a Model for Big Brother's Spy-cycle*. In both, surveillance style video and audience participation merged to create an interactive, phenomenological experience. In Pop art Warhol's *Silver Clouds* (1966) and, in conceptual art, Robert Smithson's late 1960s mirror displacements used objects with reflective surfaces in environments. In the case of Warhol, viewers walk through a gallery of reflective balloons. The visitor's countenance is fractured and fed back, multiplied and floating, as he or she moves through the space. In Smithson's *Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan* (1969) published in *ArtForum*, he included a narrative and photographs of mirrors placed in the landscape. Viewers (in the mode of "readers") are encouraged to experience shifts of perceptions through Smithson's eyes as when he writes:

Each mirror was twelve inches square, and supported from above and below by the scorched earth alone. The distribution of the squares followed the irregular contours on the ground, and they were placed in a random parallel direction. Bits of earth spilled onto the surfaces, thus sabotaging the perfect reflections of the sky. Dirt hung in the sultry sky. Bits of blazing cloud mixed with the ashy mass. The displacement was *in* the ground, not *on* it. 121 Smithson Yucatan

In both Warhol and Smithson's works ideas of looking were challenged through a fission and collapse of space -- in *Yucatan*, earth and sky simultaneously exist apart and together, and in *Silver Clouds* a single body coexists with its own kinetic phantasms.

In Gregor Kregar's *Piercing The Clouds*, this potential for the altered perceptions that mirroring can provide combines with utopian ideas of architecture and a constructivist impulse to merge art and life. In the gallery, complex geometric sculptures are constructed with triangulated forms of mirrored stainless steel. The sculptures are angular and mathematical yet somehow seem to have grown in the gallery like futuristic, architectonic plants. Resembling crystalline structures, the sculptures are influenced in part by Tony Smith's polyhedral plywood works of the 1960s. Kregar says that crystalline formations are a natural outgrowth of his interest in alchemy, explaining, "Crystals are natural but follow mathematical, 'unnatural' principles like straight lines, sharp angles and very geometric mathematical forms." In *Piercing The Clouds*, however, Kregar uses these forms along with photographs and videos of clouds to create a fantastic environment. In it the light of the projector is cast on to and reflected off of the mirrored sculptures. These projections are then reflected in a fragmentary fashion throughout the

gallery. The gallery becomes a refracted collage of reflected, overlapping skies. The moving images simultaneously enhance and interfere with one another. The space even includes reflective “shadows” – two-dimensional outlines of mirrored steel that hug the three-dimensional structures. Additionally, photographs of clouds taken from a high altitude are placed strategically on the walls. The scale of the photographs and the immediacy of the clouds create an effect of looking out of a window from this city in the sky.

The environment of the sky invades the interior space, but also can be seen through a “window” as if it were outside. Location is doubled. Are we on the inside looking out or on the outside looking in? Assumed relationships in viewing are subverted, allowing for a more direct sense of discovery. As Kregar observes about *Piercing The Clouds*, “The experience is not taken for granted and the view is not taken for granted. These objects are much more alive, offer experience, and are more fluid than just an object in space. The surfaces are changing all the time.” As in Smithson’s mirror displacement, dirt hangs on the (moving) sky and sky (reflected in mirrors and arrested in its motion by the camera) sinks into dirt. Two planes become one. Our viewing habits are jolted via a radical juxtaposition that collapses disparate physical spaces into one viewing field. According to Kregar, “The mirrored surfaces in *Piercing The Clouds* open up the experience of the gallery. They transform it into an interactive space where the viewer is both reflected in and absorbed by the sculpture. When you move you see other parts of the room, other people moving through the space, the projected images of clouds and yourself.” For Kregar, sculpture is not just something to observe. This is why his works often use scale, materials and sound to remind the perceiver of his or her bodies -- one cannot view these sculptures as a disembodied “eye” or sit back and be entertained by them as spectacle. In past works, Kregar created huge glass orbs that seem threatening and fragile. In the *One More Round* (2005), for instance, viewers stand inside a seventeen-foot tall orb made of glass and steel. Their entrance triggers light and sound. While his concerns with these sculptures are phenomenological, they are aligned with architecture more than with Minimalism: “Much of my sculpture, including this work, is meant to trigger ideas and get people thinking and talking about how we use space – to think about why we build what we build.”

While *Airborne Mirror City* is a natural outgrowth of his interest in absorbing sculptural environments, these architectural concerns add a utilitarian hue. There is an interest in the history of utopian flying architecture and in how these experiments affect our outlooks on architecture and living habits. He is attracted to Russian Constructivist art and architecture, especially to the works and legacy of Konstantin Melnikov, Vladimir Tatlin and Georgy Krutikov. Kregar elaborates:

For a long time I have been interested in the Russian avant-garde and how they treated art not as elitist, but as something that people can engage in as part of life. I was fascinated with how constructivists made art: the flying projects that never took off, bicycle plane, furniture and these utilitarian types of things. My thinking about sculpture was expanded by these ideas. For me it is obvious that these works in *Airborne Mirror City* are almost models for buildings.

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