

Corridor

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By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Permission to Use.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Illustrations	iv
Corridor	1
In-Between Spaces	2
Space	3
Time	7
Inside/Outside	8
Where Do The Shapes Come From?.....	8
Seeing.....	10
Movement	11
Liminality	13
Bibliography	17

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figure 1. Joanne Lyons, video still, re-edited 2007.
- Figure 2. Joanne Lyons, *Corridor*, work in progress, 2008.
- Figure 3. Joanne Lyons, *Corridor*, work in progress, 2008.
- Figure 4. Joanne Lyons, *Corridor*, work in progress, 2008.
- Figure 5. Joanne Lyons, doily stack, 2007.
- Figure 6. Joanne Lyons, frottaged drawing, 2007.
- Figure 7. Joanne Lyons, frottaged drawing, 2008.
- Figure 8. Bill Viola, *The Reflecting Pool*, 1977-79. www.artgalleryalberta.com
- Figure 9. David Hoffos, *Scenes from the House Dream: Bachelor's Bluff*, 2005.
www.openspace.ca/web/archive/1/2007-11
- Figure 10. Joanne Lyons, manipulated photograph, *Corridor*, work in progress, 2008.

Corridor

A corridor is a passage between two places, an empty space, that is neither here nor there. My exhibition, *Corridor*, is such a passage, a liminal space that plays with the boundaries of memory and perception. This immersive environment evolved from a two minute video that I produced several years ago using old 8 mm home movie footage. The video shows a young child running in slow motion through a backyard garden. The child is me and the scene is a vivid early memory. Sensations of light, colour, and movement flood back when I recall this summer day. *Corridor* is not a recreation of an event from the past, but rather an exploration of felt experience, memory, and imagination. Using the garden video as a starting point, my installation exaggerates sensations remembered and perhaps imagined. Movement, space, patterns, and light are treated as a sensual aesthetic field, connecting visual and sensory experience. Light, for example, an underlying quality that my memory of this event retains, is a prevalent visual element in *Corridor* which I use to produce the feeling of weightlessness. Lightness is the physical sensation most often associated with joy.

The original film was recorded by my mother as she and my aunt watched from the kitchen window. Undoubtedly, my memory has been influenced by the film's frequent showing in our home, which made public my private experience. That contrast, combined with the recollection of the intimate darkened living room and the pronounced presence of the movie projector's flickering light and sound has merged in my mind with the event itself.

The flower garden memory has had a continuing metamorphosis. I altered and personalized the original film by manipulating the footage, artificially saturating the colour and slowing down the motion to a dreamlike quality. Transferring the film to video resulted in degeneration of the image, a fragmenting quality which I exaggerated. My installation continues the investigations of this video, which encapsulates the expression of buoyant joy and sense of discovery that motivate my art practice. Intrigued by the way that even small changes, in media or concept, can produce hugely different results, I use the early garden memory to look at the fertile

potential in the way our imaginations recycle fragments of memories into multiple stories. The themes of whole and fragmented, interior and exterior, and hidden and revealed, have been ongoing explorations for the past two years and have culminated in this installation. *Corridor* examines the supposed stability of memory and questions assumed oppositions. Through fragmentation and optical illusions, showing boundaries in flux, the installation posits an alternate possibility of dualities, dissolved.



Figure 1. Joanne Lyons, video still, reedited 2007.

IN-BETWEEN SPACES

Liminality, like the space of a corridor, is a state of being on the threshold between two different places. As a state of transition, liminality can allow associative meanings from the unconscious mind to surface, and encourage the replacement of limiting, inflexible thought, with an openness to new perspectives and possibilities. A liminal state is not quite one thing or the other. It is that momentary threshold between waking and sleeping, between conscious and unconscious thought, when

so many strikingly clear ideas surface. It is that moment at the end of a summer's day, when the setting sun causes shadows to deepen and colours to become more intense, and we become aware not only of our heightened perception, but also of how we are part of a fleeting, yet dynamic, transitional experience.

These ideas of thresholds and limen are consistent with the significance that in-between spaces have had in developing my installation, *Corridor*. We can see empty spaces as negative voids, or we can view them as opportunities to discover the unfamiliar, revealing what strange and complicated things might be hidden under the surface.

SPACE

Imagining and creating alternate realities comes from a desire to lift out of the dullness that can come with day to day existence, to show a different way of looking at the world, and to awaken the potential for discovery. My interest in this is shared by contemporary Berlin-based artist, Olafur Eliasson, who often uses illusion to recreate natural phenomenon as a way to get us to see from a different perspective. Writing about his exhibition, *Take Your Time*, curator Madeleine Grynsztejn, says that, "For Eliasson, wonder is an ethical imperative; it is the quality of experience that prompts us toward an intensive engagement with the world, that continually reawakens us to a fresh consideration of the everyday and the lives we choose to live in it." ¹

In order to be transported to an imaginary realm, disbelief has to be suspended. When I walk into an art gallery, I have expectations that are different than entering most other public spaces, already making me curious. For me, that curiosity is further enhanced if I am coming into a darkened installation space. I anticipate that I can expect something outside of the ordinary, in the same way that a fairy tale beginning, "Long ago in a land far away ...," is a cue to shift out of my habitual, perceptual mode.

In *Corridor*, I integrate a range of media, including architecture, sculpture, drawing, and video projection, to produce an evanescent experience. The physical

¹ Madeleine Grynsztejn, *Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson, Exhibition Catalogue*. (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p27.

structure is constructed of corrugated plastic panels, sheets of frosted mylar, mirrored mylar, and projection. All of the materials used involve light. They are either translucent or reflective, or they cast or block light. I have sought out materials that create optical effects to expand the space and dissolve solidity, as well as to create sensory illusions of movement. Reflective film was chosen instead of rigid glass mirror, for instance, because it appears to breathe when hung floating off the floor. Its black surface ripples and creates an illusion of depth so that you see both the surface and deep space simultaneously. The flickering optical effects produced by combining these materials with light reference the visual and auditory information of my memory of the garden and its subsequent viewings as a projected home movie.

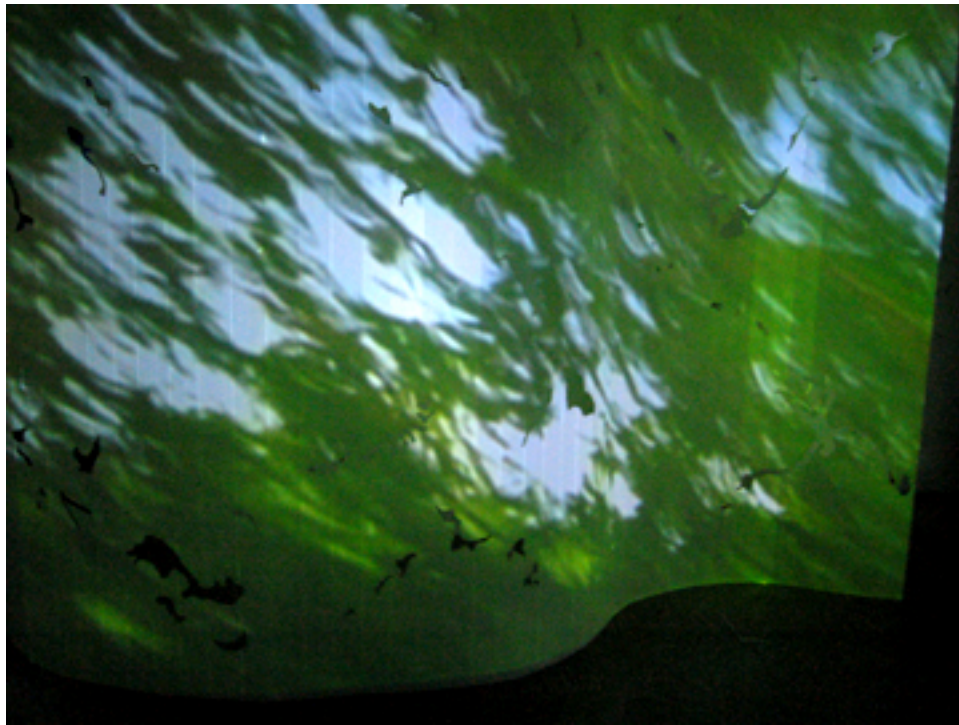


Figure 2. Joanne Lyons, *Corridor*, work in progress, 2008.

Coming into the gallery, viewers of *Corridor* see a long curving wall that glows with projected light. The structure on which the video projection falls is monolithic at eight feet high and thirty-six feet long. It acts as a screen for the projection but has a strong sculptural and architectural presence. Organic shapes are cut out of the



Figures 3 and 4. Joanne Lyons, work in progress, 2008.

screen/wall in order to produce a dynamic rhythm. There is a progression in the number of cutouts in each corrugated plastic panel, with fewer in the panel at the far left and many cut shapes in the panel at the opposite end. I hope that the characteristics of the abstracted shapes encourage viewers to make personal and imaginative connections. For example, one of the cut shapes might be seen as a bird or as a clawed sea creature or as a witch, depending on how it is looked at. Viewers can peek through these cut spaces when they walk closer, seeing layers of more cutout shapes.

A magical luminosity entices people to enter into the actual corridor, a complex and unfamiliar interior space where light and colour are reflected on and beyond the hanging mylar panels that comprise the second, inside, "wall". Some of these cutout mylar drawings are quite abstract, as if the biomorphic shapes are in the process of reconfiguration, and some have settled into complete compositions depicting strange, surreal creatures. Viewers may initially see the hanging panels as lyrically delicate patterns of light and shadow, and only perceive figures in the shapes as they

look closer. Mirrored panels layered behind the cut drawings make spatial boundaries difficult to distinguish. Light, colour, and movement transform the materials through small shifting changes, just as the turn of a kaleidoscope surprisingly shifts the arrangement of shapes into new and arresting patterns. The video projections enhance this effect, infusing *Corridor's* surface with a seductive quality. Bending trees and blurring leaves transform into a rich suffusion of moving colour on the structure's exterior. Some of the video footage I have selected includes recognizable images from nature, while other images are more abstract. In combining both representative and abstract imagery, I am using nature as a metaphor for change and renewal. The more familiar, recognizable images of huge daisies or tiger lilies, for example, serve as a visual and perceptual contrast to the blurred and flickering abstractions of nature. These latter point to the more immediate possibilities of raw perception and sensory knowledge as less rational and orderly ways of knowing.

In contemporary art, video and installation strategies are often seamlessly connected and interdependent, as *Corridor* is in its combination of video images and constructed space. Viewers have an active role as they move through my installation. They may be aware of not only being affected by *Corridor*, but of how they influence their surrounding space. For instance, someone walking in the interior may be seen in broken bits through the cutout shapes and perhaps change the perception of viewers watching the projection on the exterior. I do not demand any one particular interpretation of the work, but instead hope that viewers will form ideas based on their own subjective impressions and their past experiences. This way of experiencing moving images is the opposite of what occurs when viewing mass media film and video, where we are passive spectators who see as the camera sees and are drawn into the narrative of someone else's story. In her recent book, *Installation Art*, British art critic, Claire Bishop, writes about current video art, saying that while early video artists thwarted "visual pleasure as a direct opposition to the mainstream use of the moving image", contemporary artists are "as smitten with the cinematic object as they are critical of it."² In *Corridor*, my intention is to have the moving images and the surrounding environment create an immersive experience of wonder that plays back

² Claire Bishop. *Installation Art: A Critical History*, (London: Tate Publishing Ltd, 2005), p96.

and forth between heightened perception and dissolving boundaries - a fluid state of awareness that might open the door to imaginative possibilities.

TIME

In *Corridor*, visual qualities such as reflections of light on the mylar panels and on the floor create a hovering weightlessness and also contribute to the feeling of suspended time. The whole environment, including the images in the video projection that fade slowly into one another, and the quiet and spacious white gallery that the installation is situated in, point to an endless notion of time. Coinciding with this suspension of time is the real time that viewers' participation in the installation requires. In order to absorb the experience of *Corridor*, viewers have to be willing to take time.

The term "theatrical" began to be used in the late 1960's, when American art critic, Michael Fried, defined work that involved viewers' durational time as theatre, not art. In his view, art was to be self-contained and autonomous, separate from all other disciplines. Fried's essay, *Art and Objecthood*, written in 1967, denounced the theatricality of American artists like Robert Morris and Bruce Nauman, who had begun to push aside the traditional conventions of sculpture and recognize the spectator's role, interacting with the work. Fried wrote that, "the success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre."³ Since his famous declaration, approaches to sculpture and installation art which insist on viewers' real time experiences have grown steadily. In her book, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, American art historian and critic, Rosalind Krauss, countered Fried's statement and wrote that theatricality in artwork is "central to the reformulation of the sculptural enterprise: what the object is, how we know it, and what it means to 'know it.'"⁴ The theatrical aspects of installations such as *Corridor* are no longer considered to be a liability, but are recognized as rich and valuable contributions to contemporary art .

³ Rosalind Krauss discusses Michael Fried's comments on art and theatricality, and quotes from his 1967 essay in her book, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The MIT Press), 1977, p 203.

⁴ Krauss, p 242.

INSIDE/OUTSIDE

In constructing an architectural structure that we are invited to enter, I attempt to set up a dialogue between exterior and interior. The exterior “wall” is translucent, allowing the video projection to carry through and appear in reverse on its opposite side. The exterior “wall” also has holes cut into it. These curious organic shapes look like black shadows against the coloured imagery of the projection. The shapes are cut through like portals, encouraging an integration of one side with the other. Images of nature, projected from the outside, mingle with the kaleidoscopic interior space through the projection and reflection of fragmented bits on all surfaces. The viewer, standing inside the space of *Corridor*, becomes part of this fragmenting experience that connects the inner and outer spheres. Likewise, as I discuss above in relation to time, the viewer simultaneously experiences real, everyday time, as well as a sense of timelessness in *Corridor*. In these ways, through space and time, I join other contemporary installation artists who merge apparent contradictions and create new, hybrid possibilities of meaning.⁵

WHERE DO THE SHAPES COME FROM?



Figure 5. Joanne Lyons, doily stack, 2007.

⁵ Australian artist, Zofia Slezziak, discusses the merging of contradictions experienced in installation practices in her essay, *Liminal Spaces Within a Contemporary Australian Art's Practice*, 2000. <http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/documents/zofiaslezziak.doc>

Prior to beginning this body of work, I had wandered about thrift stores, searching for an object that would resonate with the nebulous thoughts and memories that were circulating in a still unconscious way. One day I noticed that I kept being drawn to the bins of unwanted hand crocheted doilies. Following this intuitive clue, I bought a few small round ones, enjoying the variety of airy and intricate patterns. This led to many trips and many more purchases until I had accumulated hundreds of doilies. This one source material evolved in many diverse ways through my experimental working process. One of the things I did quite extensively was to make graphite rubbings on vellum, with the doilies placed underneath. I was fascinated by the way patterns were revealed with this frottage technique. The fixed patterns of the crocheted doilies were transformed and destabilized. As I kept rubbing and randomly combining elements of different doilies, the emerging images continually surprised me. They looked like odd,

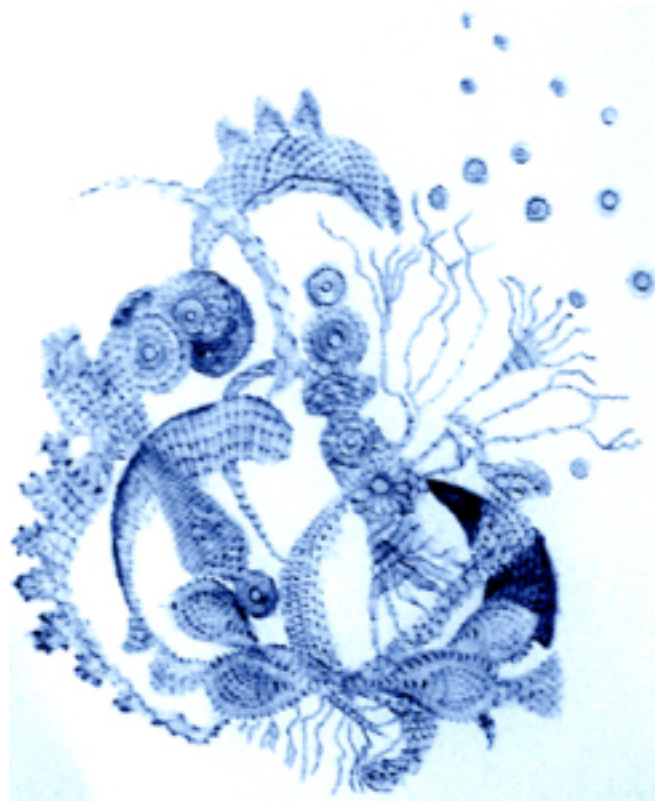


Figure 6. Joanne Lyons, frottaged drawing, 2007.



Figure 7. Joanne Lyons, frottaged drawing, 2008.

underwater creatures that might have been rejected from evolutionary science experiments. As these fanciful characters became increasingly animated, I began to wonder what kind of a world they might inhabit, with their too-long necks and odd-shaped bodies. When I placed the doilies on an overhead projector to enlarge them as black silhouettes on the wall, it was clear to me that the shapes of negative spaces were as important as the areas of thread; eventually I related this to the in-between spaces of the fragmented garden video and the remembered and imagined sensations and ideas they evoked. I started to combine shapes that resembled the fragmented areas of the video with shapes similar to the doily rubbings. In *Corridor*, my source materials of the early garden video and the doilies are transformed beyond recognition, but they are there, residing in all the cut shapes, patterns, and voids in the liminal space of this installation.

SEEING

Despite the fact that I am a *visual* artist, I am fascinated by what can *not* be seen or explained. Since the 17th Century, science has increasingly been thought capable of understanding all of nature's secrets. In our contemporary Western culture, we tend to privilege sight, believing that we can see and know everything if only we look the right way or use the right viewing instruments. In my art, I use the tools and techniques of illusion to create an uncertainty about what is taken for granted. By combining projection and a technique of cut work with translucent and reflective materials, kaleidoscopic optical effects occur, resulting in many small changes as our point of view alters even slightly. Unlike Renaissance perspective, there is no one perfect position from which to see the work. Light and shadow, as well as cut openings, are used to both reveal and hide. At times, looking through the delicate cut shapes on the interior panels, we can glimpse the whole, rather than fragmented image, and sometimes we can catch partial reflections of ourselves.

Olafur Eliasson uses the phrase "seeing ourselves seeing" to describe the mind aware of its own cognition.⁶ Eliasson uses illusion in order to provide an

⁶ Madeleine Grynsztejn, *Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson, Exhibition Catalogue*. (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p27.

experience rather than produce an art object. For one of the pieces in *Take Your Time*, he suspended a huge, mirrored sphere from the ceiling. I imagine that it would be unsettling for viewers to look up and see themselves reflected upside down and distorted in size and shape. They would be aware of observing themselves and others, and at the same time would feel rather disembodied, going beyond observing and becoming absorbed into the reflections of the shiny orb. Some viewers of the work have apparently reported experiencing a sense of vertigo and loss of balance looking up. The interplay of sensory and perceptual experiences in a disorienting installation such as Eliasson's, or my own, *Corridor*, provides the context for an experience outside of familiar, conscious, and visible reality - immersion in a synaesthetic experience of dissolved boundaries.

MOVEMENT

In *Corridor*, I am deliberately using video to manipulate sensory experiences of time and movement, not to develop a narrative. Multiple, unsynchronized projections create motion effects that are unlike what happens when a singular video is seen. For instance, at times the reversal and repetition of the three projected images creates the sensation of spinning. Standing in the gallery, viewers might alternately feel as if the video is pushing out towards them or that they are being pulled into a vortex. Watching such a projection, particularly at the size I am using, can produce the physical sensation of movement in viewers. While it is not my intention to create an unpleasant experience, I realize that it is a possibility for some viewers. My video does not follow a linear structure or develop a story. Images fade into one another and repeat with subtle variations. The camera angle and the timing work together to produce the feeling of swishing, gliding, or perhaps soaring. In his essay, *Breathing in the World*, American art and cultural critic, Dave Hickey discusses this way of using the medium of video. He describes movement that is not driven by linear narrative, but instead, moves along rhythmically, engaging us to move with it, as temporal movement. In my video, time is slowed down, creating the feeling of an endless flow. Hickey refers to this use of time that simply flows along, possibly in

rhythms or cycles, rather than directed toward a conclusion, as chronos time.⁷ I have placed seating in the gallery to encourage viewers to take time to watch the video. I hope that they may find that the slow rhythm of the projection pulls them into its ebb and flow.

Light, time, movement, memory, and expanded space have fused together in *Corridor*. We think about infinite space when looking at the night sky and the huge universe beyond us, and also when we consider our own mortality. The idea of space without limit is often thought of as frightening, as is the concept of boundless euphoria. In both, a dangerous lack of control is implied. Twirling or spinning, for instance, are intoxicating actions, but carried to extreme, can bring distressful panic. In my installation, I visually represent the idea of loss of boundaries through my technique of cutting, which literally fragments the material. If we return to the early garden video that inspired my subsequent use of in-between spaces, there are two ways of seeing dissolution. One is as a pattern that seems to be coming apart. There is a sense of loss for the past experiences that we cannot relive, and can only recall in fleeting fragments. The second way of seeing dissolution is as a pattern that keeps recreating itself, dissolving boundaries and continually evolving. There is an energy to the rhythm and movement created. Taking in both views gives a simultaneous, interconnected sense of loss and regenerative transformation. Loss and joy can be seen as interrelated rather than as contradictions. We need to experience one to fully appreciate the other.

In my work, dematerializing is mesmerizing and celebrated, not frightening. A similar view is evident in the work of American video and installation artist, Bill Viola. Viola uses nature's cycles and dissolution to symbolically represent transformation. I recently saw his projection, *The Reflecting Pool*, in which a male figure walks from a treed area to stand by the edge of a pool of water. In slow motion, he prepares to jump, then does so suddenly, only to freeze, suspended in midair. Then, almost imperceptibly at first, the image of the figure dissolves into the background imagery of trees. The water slowly darkens and we see him pull himself out of the pool and walk into the treed area.

⁷ JoAnne Northrup, Dave Hickey, and Dan Cameron, ed., *Jennifer Steinkamp*, (Munich: Prestel, 2006) p120-124. Hickey credits British literary critic, Frank Kermode (*The Sense of an Ending*), with the terms "temporal movement" and "chronos time".

In *The Reflecting Pool*, as well as in *Corridor*, being without boundaries can be seen as a regenerative cycle of energy. In this continuing cycle there is hope for the newly created and the not-yet discovered.



Figure 8. Bill Viola, *The Reflecting Pool*, 1977 - 79.

LIMINALITY

In *Corridor*, there is a constant play between heightened perception and a reduced awareness of boundaries that distinguish the self from its surroundings. I am addressing two interpretations of the subject: the literal, centred, self-reflexive viewer who is physically present in the work, and the abstract, fragmented model of the subject that is the viewer's consciousness. Claire Bishop writes that the apparent paradox of both centred and decentred subject is due to the ambiguity between two subject types functioning simultaneously in installation art. She says that no matter how dispersed an encounter in an installation might be, a viewer's firsthand experience can only be had by a centred, unified subject. Bishop writes that installation art "insists on our centred presence in order then to subject us to an experience of decentring."⁸

A similar coexisting duality exists in the work of Lethbridge installation artist, David Hoffos. In her catalogue essay on Hoffos' work, Nancy Tousley writes of the

⁸ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, (London: Tate Publishing Ltd, 2005), p 130

double pleasure in simultaneous analysis and synthesis. She says that the ideal viewer of his installations is in a “fluid state of imaginative awareness that fluctuates between absolute terms, like actuality and fantasy, and is energized by its attraction to opposites.”⁹ Hoffos leaves the methods of his optical illusions exposed, making you aware of yourself seeing, but also drawn in, and dissolved into the fiction.



Figure 9. David Hoffos, *Scenes from the House Dream: Bachelor's Bluff*, 2005.

I recently saw Hoffos' installation, *Scenes from the House Dream: Bachelor's Bluff*. When I entered the darkened room, I was drawn toward the light of two television monitors and noticed a small picture frame on the wall. As I investigated, I saw that the frame was actually a window into the expanded space of another world. In the interior, a miniature three-dimensional scene had been constructed using real

objects to replicate rocks, beach, and moving water. There was a lighthouse at the far end and the projection of a young man on the rocks, tossing pebbles into the water below. I knew that I was outside of this world, looking in, but, as I became absorbed into it, I stopped trying to figure out how Hoffos made it happen, and just allowed myself to be swept into the scene. The loss of boundaries I experienced is exemplified by the connection I felt with the almost life-size projection of a woman who appeared to be leaning against the wall of the gallery nearby. As I turned to leave, I had the disconcerting experience of moving from observing a miniature and fictional space through a window, to sharing my real space in the gallery with this extremely realistic projection. I felt as if she and I were connected by some kind of relationship with the young man and the place he occupied. French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel's describes of an encounter with a presence in a way that matches the reaction I had while in Hoffos' installation.

⁹ Nancy Tousley, *David Hoffos: The Lethbridge Illusionist and His Cinema of Attractions*, exhibition catalogue, (Calgary and Lethbridge: Illingworth Kerr Gallery and Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 2000.)

In his essay, *On the Ontological Mystery*, Marcel writes , “I am unable to treat him as if he were merely placed in front of me; between him and me there arises a relationship which, in a sense, surpasses my awareness of him; he is not only before me, he is also within me”.¹⁰

Writing about Hoffos’ work, curator Anthony Kiendl says, “Through the seams of objectivized knowledge, a knowledge that is irrational, contentious, and magical flickers in the darkness,”¹¹ Another kind of knowledge is also revealed in *Corridor*, where a “wisdom of the body”¹² is found in the liminal space between the familiar, safe exterior and the unfamiliar, unknown of the shimmering interior. This embodied knowledge is present in the nebulously flickering, shifting fragments of memories, feelings, and thoughts floating about in the air, mingling, and rearranging into patterns.¹³

In *Corridor*, I insist on seeing and knowing differently. I strive to connect conflicting notions, to speak of the untapped potential of knowledge that exists in the gaps and spaces of the visible and familiar. In this liminal space, free of rules or expected ways of thinking, our imaginations can leap between the gaps and discover that empty spaces inspire new thoughts and feelings. A passage is opened up to take us beyond our usual boundaries of memory and perception into an imagined world of lightness and possibilities.

¹⁰ Gabriel Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery”, from *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans Manya Harari, (New York: Citadel Press, 1967), p 9-46.

¹¹ Anthony Kiendl, *Little Worlds*, Exhibition Catalogue, (Regina, Dunlop Art Gallery, 2001.), p 76

¹² Neville Wakefield, “Ann Hamilton: Between Words and Things.” *Mneme: Ann Hamilton*, exhibition catalogue, texts by Judith Nesbitt and Neville Wakefield, (Liverpool: Tate Gallery, 1994), p 15. American installation artist, Ann Hamilton refers to embodied knowledge in her own artwork as wisdom of the body.

¹³ Connie Gault, *The Soft Eclipse*, (Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing Ltd, 1990). Gault uses this phrasing in her play, which I read again while writing this paper, reminded as I was, of her similar train of thought.

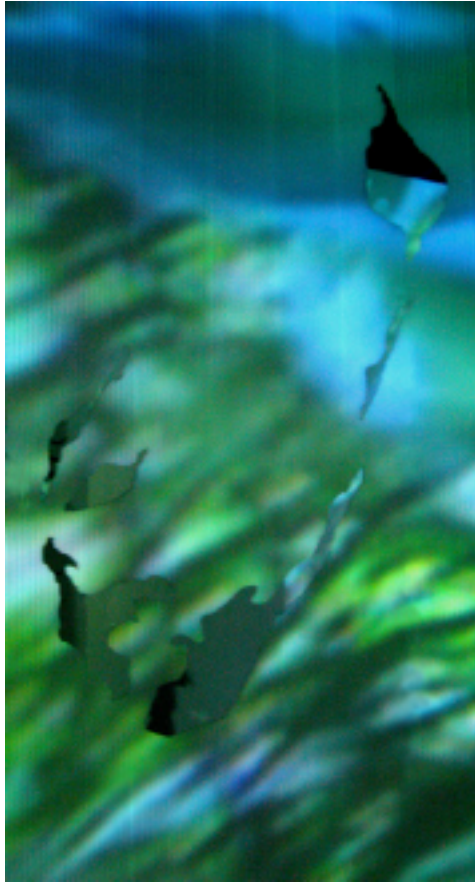


Figure 10. Joanne Lyons, manipulated photograph of *Corridor*, work in progress, 2008.

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