

‘Dancing on the Ceiling’: Exhibition shows hopes and fears of zero gravity



What is this image? A suicide? A murder? A trick with Photoshop? It is but one of many intriguing pieces of a new exhibition at RPI's Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center called "Dancing on the Ceiling: Art & Zero Gravity." Kathleen Forde, EMPAC's curator for time-based arts, calls it the first major exhibition of art in public spaces for EMPAC, and a bit of a challenge, considering the space is geared more for performance than for framed images. But contemporary art has been questioning the very nature of museum spaces, so this exhibition of work from 11 artists -- photography, video and installation -- fits the "experimental" mission of EMPAC and its focus on zero gravity ties in to RPI's scientific mission.

Yes, Lionel Ritchie's "Dancing on the Ceiling" video is shown as part of a loop in a knowing wink to connotations of frivolity (though a clip of "Defying Gravity" from the musical "Wicked" would have also been a nice touch, and a little less dated).

Forde, however, said one of her goals was to present an exhibition of "thoughtful lightness." Thus we get the work of French photographer Denis Darzacq, whose series "La Chute" ("The Fall") freezes young hip-hop dancers in air, giving the illusion they are falling. A making-of video nearby shows the artist at work, talking with the young dancers, but his images capture only a single dancer, which emphasizes isolation and disturbing uncertainty of what's about to happen.

Just as disconcerting is the 1997 video installation "Stasi City," by British twin sisters Jane and Louise Wilson, who

filmed inside the former East German secret police headquarters. The piece is in one of the black box theaters and four projectors cast images on four walls, surrounding the viewer with shots of stark, empty hallways and rooms that recall Cold War-era nightmares. But then a figure appears who, somehow, floats magically through the air, as if escaping the Stasi confines -- at least for a little while.

Two of the most compelling pieces in the exhibition are works commissioned by EMPAC specifically for this show.

"Float!/Think Tank 21" by the German-born artist Thom Kubli is a flotation tank near the Concert Hall, in which people can make reservations, for free, to experience a 45-minute sound installation that begins with Kubli inviting the person to think about political awareness as a political act.

Kubli, who was at EMPAC on the exhibition's opening day, said, "I want to provide a space that is different ... (where) you are free to let your thoughts go." The artist, who is also a composer and is known for his sound installations, was inspired by the psychoanalyst John Lilly, who developed isolation tanks as a way of removing the mind from outside stimuli and who also experimented with the then-legal drug LSD.

Also available are audio recordings Kubli made on his thoughts on various subjects after he experienced the flotation tank.

The other commissioned artist for the exhibition is the New York City-based Chris Doyle, who has two pieces that interact with the EMPAC building itself. In one, the movement of the elevator from one floor to the next triggers a video projector to play animations that play off the theme of zero gravity.

The other is a six-minute video that is projected on the south side of the EMPAC building that shows cartoonish figures that seem to float, jump and turn into and out of EMPAC's windows.

He made this film by rotoscoping video he took of skateboarders at The Shelter, an indoor skate park in Albany. The piece, "Method Air," transforms the EMPAC building into an art medium that is available for the public to see each night beginning at sundown.

Perhaps the most intriguing piece is Shanghai artist Xu Zhen's 2007 work "In Just a Blink of the Eye." In the piece, an actor wearing baggy athletic pants and jacket appears to be endlessly frozen as he or she falls backward. Hidden by the clothes is a metal brace that holds the person in place.

At EMPAC, students from RPI's Chinese American Student Association will "perform" the piece by getting into the brace, thus suggesting a moment of unease of the American story, of escaping or migrating to new territory, but almost always threatened by the realities of the past, which can ceaselessly pull people back with possible dangerous consequences.

The actor, however, never falls, but is locked in a liminal state, which suggests both the hopes and fears of being freed from real and metaphoric gravities.

For the curator, Forde, this exhibition -- and the ideas it allows viewers to consider -- are at the heart of new phase in the 18-month-old EMPAC experiment.

"This really marks the start of an ongoing mission to incorporate art in public spaces," she said, "to reinvigorate social spaces."