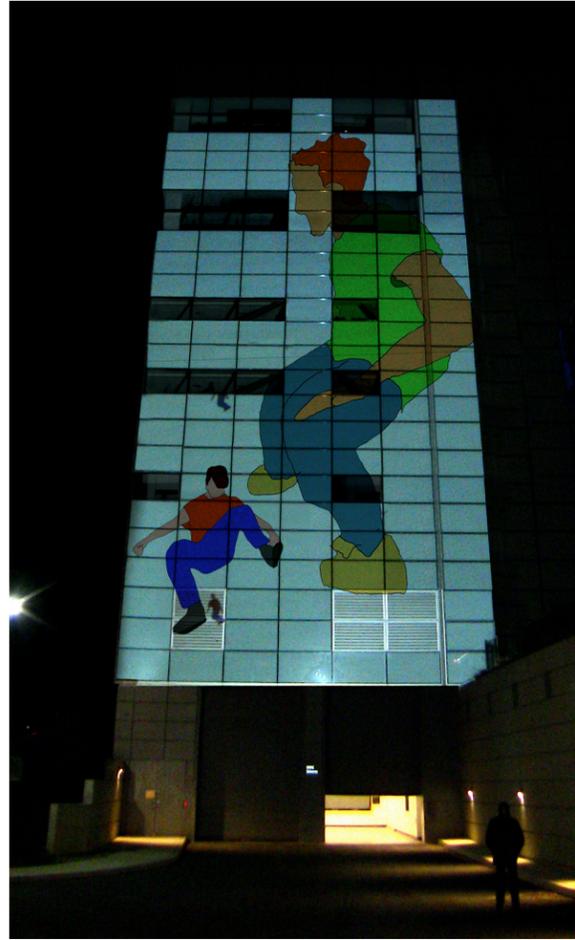


Troy Record
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Heavy concepts abound in 'Dancing on the Ceiling' at EMPAC

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The Record



You have to admire an art event that has a gigantic invitation posted on the side of its building. Check out the south side of EMPAC on the RPI campus and you'll find an invitation to the art exhibit "Dancing on the Ceiling: Art and Zero Gravity."

You've probably wondered about those nighttime projections on the building. They appear to be skateboarders flowing in and out of windows on the south wall of EMPAC. They are really an invitation to come to the free exhibit in the public spaces of EMPAC, which continues through April 10.

The images are a digital projection titled "Method Air" by artist Chris Doyle commissioned as part of the visual art exhibit. It's an exhibit intended also as an invitation. Doyle says when he first saw the EMPAC structure it struck him as "a formidable edifice." He felt images of carefree, exuberant skateboarders on the side of the building would be a way to "break down any barriers the building might impose and invite the public inside."

If you accept the invitation there are a lot of tasty treats waiting for you within. You can say what you will about the puzzles found in the art of conceptual artists, but it is hard to deny such exhibits are never less than fun.

Included in the 14 exhibits by 11 artists are a couple of photography exhibits, several video exhibits, a couple of helium filled-balloons and some sculpture. There is even a floatation device, which (by reservation at 276-3921) members of the public can use for a 45-minute session to experience weightlessness.

Indeed, everything in the exhibit is designed to challenge your viewpoint and force you to think about man's rela-

tionship to gravity.

Kathleen Forde, who is curator of Time-Based Arts at EMPAC and the person who brought "Dancing on the Ceiling" to life, uses the term "thoughtful weightlessness" when referring to the concept underlying the exhibit.

She points out that gravity has the connotation of being heavy and is the force that keeps us grounded on earth. The opposite is zero gravity, a state of lightness that is freeing. In this exhibit the two concepts are purposely at odds with each other.

At first glance many of the exhibits in "Dancing on the Ceiling" seem almost frivolous, however there is a seriousness or gravity of thought than permeates the lighthearted approach taken by the artists.

For example, Thom Kubli's "The Float" was inspired by the thinking of John Lilly, who along with Timothy Leary experimented with then-considered "mind-expanding drugs" such as LSD. He invented the floatation tank as a space for a person to be isolated from the world. He believed such an unencumbered experience would lead to unconventional political thinking.

To support the theory, Kubli, after sessions in the tank, wrote down his political thoughts and recorded them to be heard through earphones at the exhibit.

Even the pictures of Parisian hip-hop dancers in La Chute (The Fall) have political import if you look for it.

On the surface they are images of young people caught in mid-air who seem about to fall. Artist Denis Darzacq took the pictures just after the 2005 Paris riots and he thinks of the images as a metaphor for a generation of young French people who have been abandoned by the government and left in a state of free-fall.

A similar metaphor is established by Julia Fullerton-Batten with "Cupboards" and "Staircase." In her exhibits she offers still images of adolescent girls floating in mid-air to represent young females suspended between childhood and adulthood.

To my mind, the most powerful exhibit is a four-projection video installation in Studio 2 which takes you on an eerie trip through an abandoned building. There is an uncanny sense of dread as you are surrounded by images taken from a moving elevator that explores a now-derelict facility.

Learning the name of the exhibit is "Stasi City" validates the intuitive sense of dread that comes when you experience the exhibit. Those empty disheveled ghost-filled rooms were once the headquarters of the East German secret police. It's chilling.

Despite the deep undercurrents in many exhibits this is not a dense show. Indeed, there are a couple of cases where "is this really art?" moments are included. One involves helium filled black balloons found on the ceiling of an elevator, which at dusk will be released into the air so the darkness of the biodegradable balloons can be contrasted to the brightness of the moon.

No matter how much you might disagree with an artist's concept, you will lose any argument denying the artistic value of a work. Every piece in the show has depth beyond its initial impression. Even when a piece brings a smile (or a smirk) to your face, if you reflect on the less obvious aspects of the work it will make you think about things you likely never considered before viewing the piece.

And, agree with it or not, that's art.