Rosa Barba: The Color Out of Space

Over the last ten years, Rosa Barba has created a singular body of work that encompasses films, sculptures, and text-based works. Her projects oscillate in scale as they explore the material qualities of celluloid film and the narrative possibilities of cinema. Barba’s smaller-scale, projector sculptures (influenced by what is known as structural film) examine the physical properties of the projector, celluloid, and projected light. Her longer films, by contrast, are speculative stories situated between experimental documentary and fictional narrative. Barba’s signature themes run throughout the exhibition at the List Center including her ongoing consideration of time, particularly “deep” geological time and the impossibility of grasping its immensity within the limited framework of a human time scale.

Color Clocks: VerticaIs Lean Occasionally Away from Viewpoints (2012) is a group of 35mm film sculptures that merge Barba’s structural investigations with her thematic preoccupations. Each pie-shaped form represents a segment of one hour, as a single arm seesaws up and down and loops strips of celluloid to mark the passing of time. Time As Perspective (2012), a large 35mm film projection, continues this meditation on time. Shown from a bird’s eye view, the moving pumpjacks of West Texas oil fields are reminiscent of the arms of Color Clocks. The film is interspersed with text fragments, the first of which reads: “One might assert that space is not real and ask whether it is a function of time.” Accompanied by a foreboding electronic soundtrack, the desert and the industrial devices are rendered strange and indeterminately situated in the present, past, and future.

Barba’s film Somnium (2011) was partly inspired by the “real” images of stars and planets collected over the last two years at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. A series of colored glass panels are complemented by the voices of scientists, writers, and artists reflecting on the universe—or rather, on the tiny part that is known.

Surface Tension, Screen Space — a talk by Giuliana Bruno (Emmet Blakeney Gleason Professor of Visual and Environmental Studies, Harvard University)

Obsolescence threads throughout Barba’s work on the level of both material as well as storytelling. If her early decision to use celluloid film was a conscious investment in an already outdated medium, the theme has only been thrown into starker relief over time. The artist’s works are permeated by a sense of elegiac sadness but their sensibility is not fatalistic. Rather, they are tempered by a wary wisdom that considers the inevitable limitations of human perspective and the malleability of time and space.

ABOUT THE ARTIST
Rosa Barba (b. 1972, Agrigento, Italy) lives and works in Berlin.

Rosa Barba: The Color Out of Space is curated by Henriette Huldisch, Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.