

ART LIES

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Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher, *Sky Machine River*, 2008; installation view, McClain Gallery, Houston; courtesy the artist and McClain Gallery, Houston

HOUSTON

Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher
McClain Gallery

The literal mechanization of art is all too often a self-defeating exercise—failed attempts to meld ill-conceived ideas with industrial wizardry. And, like Hollywood, the realm of fine art produces its fair share of overblown, techno-driven drivel in the hopes of wowing the viewer into submission. Thus, stumbling across a work of technical innovation and creative brilliance is a rarity indeed. Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher's *Sky Machine: River* heartens one's faith in the possibilities of fusing technology and art. This installation captures a simplistic yet sublime beauty through a mechanized process that is at once exposed and mysterious.

Shore and Fisher collaborate on works that are both cinematic and intimate. Through the subtle coalescence of audible suggestion, claustrophobic surveillance techniques and a DIY aesthetic, the duo manages to sustain fascination through observance and manipulation. Viewing the work in person distills the experience into an eerie sci-fi adventure and, at the same time, expounds on what it means to mimic the gods' omnipotent ability to manipulate matter into visions and forms that speak of eternity and mortality.

Sky Machine: River consists of exposed circuitry, spinning cogs and minuscule surveillance cameras mounted on the wall. The technical apparatus is splayed about, creating a sort of J.G. Ballard-inspired hybrid aesthetic. Wires and tubes and various mechanical parts function to gently jostle a petri dish-like container that houses grains of sand. The movement of the perpetually tilting dish is recorded by a tiny surveillance camera in front

of which is positioned a mini landscape. This tiny vignette convincingly depicts a tableau of a riverbed receding into the distance, and the resultant composite image is projected on a large flat-screen monitor adjacent to the machine.

Upon first encounter, the black-and-white video appears to be depicting a slow-moving cloud formation undulating back and forth and receding from the foreground into the distance. A soundtrack accompanies these aerial palpitations—an intense, minimal drone programmed to become more and more foreboding as the cloud formation grows in density. The dramatic tension wrought by this display is uncanny. However, it becomes all the more astounding when one realizes that mere granules of sand create the dramatic, swooping cloud formation on the monitor as the dish tilts and sways above the tiny riverbed set. The video is so convincing that it is truly difficult to believe one is looking at a scene staged in miniature—displayed right next to the monitor, no less—placed as if to demystify the entire machine.

This methodology is important in that there is no underlying agenda—no hocus-pocus involved at all. Literally, what you see is what you see. The work is a profound sortie of technology and craft and overt deception, aligned with an epic sense of metaphor. If turning grains of sand into sky is not a profoundly artistic gesture, I have no idea what is.

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