

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Raha Raissnia
by Ben La Rocco

Miguel Abreu Gallery September 7-October 19, 2008

The Miguel Abreu Gallery is low lit for “Free Way,” Raha Raissnia’s composite 35mm slide projection and 16mm film. Her big black and white paintings and small drawings don’t suffer from the dimming, a testimony to the toughness of all Raissnia’s work—you can see it in the dark. It’s as if the sci-fi illustrator H.R. Geiger were to make something that the clever-wielding minimalist Barry LeVa would approve. If your creepy meter isn’t reading high enough, a throbbing soundtrack pulsing through the gallery ought to jack it up.



Raha Raissnia, "Free Way," 2005—2008. Composite 35mm slide projection with 16mm film, 15 minute loop. Dimensions variable. Sound by Charles Curtis. 3 analog looped cassette tapes. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery.

Everything in the exhibition is about looking very closely. The imagery is abstract, but what comes across is a sense of exploring some sort of organic-mechanical system through a magnifying glass. The film is a composite of found 16mm footage spliced together and then painted and altered by hand. Some representational imagery—from x-rays, in particular—does appear, but for the most part the sensation of dark motion and changing textures dominates. Raissnia overlays the 16mm footage with 35mm slide projections thus doubling the image and deepening the sense of immersion in an alien landscape. What little color she uses (the only place it appears is in the films) seems carefully inserted to highlight the severity of the rest of the palette.

Raissnia’s paintings are large without being monumental and the emotion they convey is severely compartmentalized. This is different: we’re familiar with painting that intentionally avoids emotion to evoke contemporary being, but less so with painting

that attempts to pinpoint exactly what form our present feeling takes (as if we are any less emotional today than we ever were). The paintings' movement seems cinematic. When their black interlocking forms – sometimes jagged, sometimes curved—bleed occasionally into the white ground, it's like mist on marble. A brooding classicism underpins these dark surfaces, a labyrinthine hive extending beyond the picture plane's boundaries. Is it adapted from some other source, lifted from life as is the 16mm footage? It seems not. The forms feel found in a more organic sense. Either way, Raissnia has invested them with the power of imagination.

There's plenty of tributary history in Raissnia's work. Stan Brakhage's films are a colorful relative but there's a clearer family resemblance in the abstract films of Hans Richter from the 1920s. The mood is less somber with Richter, but the sense of a system in which elements of form repeat themselves against the mobile backdrop of cinematic time is germane. The idea of photography and film usurping painting is as long gone as the '80s. Raissnia draws on film for her painting then seamlessly exhibits the two media side by side.