

## Artist Annika Rixen's Sciences of Observation explores colour and light

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### At the Or Gallery until February 18

In the entrance to the gallery, three bottles of coloured water are subjected to a curious photographic transformation. In the next room, video images of a neon-lit shop window shift through degrees of enveloping darkness. And in a back gallery, a digital projection seems to record the Earth's shadowy movement between the moon and the sun.

*Sciences of Observation*, an exhibition of mixed-media work by Berlin-based Annika Rixen, demonstrates the ways in which she marries historical approaches to physics to her own experiments in light and colour. Rixen is especially attracted to the science of the Romantic era, she told the *Straight* in a recent interview at the Or Gallery, the age in which colour photography was invented. She immerses herself in the scientific literature of that time, but then finds almost accidental points of intersection between her art and the texts she has studied. Although she has taken the titles of her six new works from the subheadings of chapters in John Tyndall's 1873 publication *Six Lectures in Light*, her art does not attempt a literal recreation of that renowned Irish physicist's demonstrations. Instead, Rixen creates abstract art that proposes "an aesthetic regime of observation".

Rixen's fascination with the physical properties of light and early colour photography seems to parallel that of the late West Coast artist Jerry Pethick. This parallel is coincidental, however: although Rixen pursued her BFA in Vancouver, she never encountered Pethick's work. Nor does her art physically resemble his. Where Pethick often realized his interest in optics through installations and assemblages of unexpected

materials and crude found objects, Rixen works with sophisticated digital processes and media. Well, some of the time.

Her *Verification of Physical Theories* is a humorous staging of a lunar eclipse, using the dirty and dusty lens of an old camera to represent the silvery, pockmarked moon. Working in a low-tech fashion, holding the old lens in one hand and her video camera in the other, she pans through her own series of orbits, creating an inspired bit of pseudo-astronomy. *Double Refraction* is a small, floor-mounted installation in which a clear incandescent bulb (incandescent bulbs are now banned in Germany, Rixen reports) hangs between right-angled panels of dichroic acrylic glass (whose transmitted colour is different from its reflected colour), creating illusionistic shards of light and hue. It's a bit like a junior-high-school science-fair project, but with a more appealing visual outcome, and unsettling subtextual questions about Band-Aid solutions to hemorrhaging environmental problems.

*Law of Incidence and Reflection* consists of a large-scale, lusciously coloured ink-jet print, mounted on a low wooden platform that lies, like a mattress, on the floor. The image, a blurred, heart-shaped form in white surrounded by kaleidoscopic clouds of pink, green, red, orange, peach, and blue, evokes abstract painting. Rixen created it by aiming her camera, set on a long exposure time and equipped with different coloured filters, at a swinging overhead light bulb. This work represents her return to one of photography's fundamental metaphors, its capacity to paint with light.

Not all of Rixen's experiments with light, colour, and the photographic configuration of space are entirely resolved. Still, this unsettled condition serves its own purposes, communicating an ongoing state of inventiveness and creative inquiry.

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