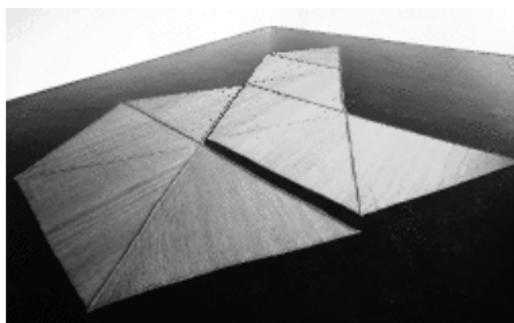


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Helen Mirra

STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY, LONDON, UK



Anecdotal evidence would suggest that a surprising number of people are afraid of the dark, but then again the average contemporary urbanite has very little experience of an unlit night. In most big cities lampposts flicker into life at dusk, illuminating the darkest corners in order to protect us from the nocturnal violence of our urban environments and blotting out the heavens in a mist of light pollution. Perhaps for this reason the near total darkness of *Arrow* (2002), the sound and video work included in Helen Mirra's first London solo show, is surprisingly hard to endure, even despite the printed warning by the door to Stephen Friedman Gallery's back space.

At unexpected intervals a ghost-like film clip illuminates the room, appearing for just long enough to burn its flickery image on to the retina. Borrowed from the early days of Hollywood epics, the moving picture shows a woman from the ancient world, pulling back her bow and arrow before being swallowed again by the blackness. This is the Babylonian 'mountain girl' from D. W. Griffith's film *Intolerance* (1916). *Arrow* is a tightly edited reflection on violence, of the human variety as well as the kind erroneously referred to by insurance companies as 'acts of god', those tornadoes, earthquakes and such like that demonstrate nature's power to destroy whole cities. To this end the piece is structurally equivalent to a storm. The guitar and bass of the attractive soundtrack evoke rain and thunder, while the irregular flashing images appear at the same intervals as lightning.

Meanwhile, the main gallery space is dominated by a Minimalist-looking floor piece, constructed out of triangular pieces of a rich indigo-coloured fabric and titled *Sky Wreck* (2001). It is a fragment from Mirra's insanely ambitious attempt to build a scale map of the sky (originally shown in Chicago, where Mirra is

based), using the same mathematical principles as a geodesic dome. It is at once reminiscent of the efforts of early cartographers and of that 20th-century incarnation of the 'Renaissance man' Richard Buckminster Fuller, who is credited with the creation of the geodesic dome.

Like Helen Mirra, Buckminster Fuller got the initial idea for many of his structures from the natural world. But the similarity ends there, as he opted to use the latest modern materials in his inventions, in the belief that increasingly efficient technology would result in a situation where all the inhabitants of the Earth could be sustained by its resources, the result of which would be a 'one world' society that he catchily termed 'Space Ship Earth'. When he turned his attention at one point to ceramic plumbing and the humble toilet bowl, he saw a wasteful and antiquated system. However, manufacture of his lightweight stainless steel version was obstructed by the plumbers' union, as it was precisely the inefficiency of ceramics that kept them in work.

By contrast, the fabric for Sky Wreck was woven in India, using a very basic mechanical loom and an old-fashioned method of production. This amounts to a rejection by Mirra of technological progress, along with Sky Wreck's Minimalist origins, as the Minimalists too preferred industrial processes to the handmade. Similarly the text piece housed in the corridor is written on an unobtrusive cloth strap using an old typewriter - that dated piece of office machinery which, though synonymous with the Conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s, is used here in an uncomfortably romantic gesture. It reads like a fragment of poetry and seems (after much deciphering) to be about mankind's gradual dominance of the sea.

Minus the name (taken from a Paul Celan poem), Sky Wreck looks like an exorcism of Modernism, dwelling on the now familiar point about the similarity between furniture design and formalist sculpture - a Carl Andre floor piece designed to fold up into a tasteful set of polyhedral beanbags. However, there is no Postmodern irony intended; Mirra's work is more an exploration of a personal sense of the poetic: the sea, the sky and humankind's gradual alienation from the natural world.