

## CHICAGO

### Helen Mirra at the Renaissance Society

In Helen Mirra's video *The Ballad of Myra Furrow* (1994), the artist, dressed in a peacoat and cap, sings a sea chantey as she stands before Lake Michigan in the drizzling rain. The atmospheric image of Mirra's dark figure against the vast, gray expanse of water has haunted me ever since I first saw it. So does her most recent work, *Sky-Wreck*, a site-specific installation created for the Renaissance Society in which Mirra mapped a portion of the sky.

The title is taken from a poem by Paul Celan, while the

work itself, a 60-by-30-foot piece of blue cloth, was structured in the same modular manner as Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes—i.e., in equilateral triangles. Celan's poem was painted on one side of the gallery's entryway; a portion of Fuller's related mathematical computations was painted on the opposite wall. According to the latter, then, what Mirra presents is "1/111th of the sky at a scale of 1:333," created from a sweep of blue cotton fabric that blankets the floor.

Mirra's flat, polyhedral form, made of 110 interlocking triangles, echoes Celan's elliptical, economic prose and reflects Fuller's utopian belief that complex problems can be solved by the simplest means. During a trip to India, the artist had the fabric woven and hand-dyed with indigo. Later Mirra cut and

stitched the cloth to interact with the geometry of the gallery's interior. *Sky-Wreck* continues Mirra's interest in nature, a theme explored throughout much of her work, which also includes artists' books, film and sound recordings. Mirra has worked with textiles in the past, most notably in her "films"—16mm, horizontal bands of sewn fabric, often incorporating text derived from actual works of cinema.

In *Sky-Wreck*, it appears at first that Mirra has rendered nature a mere object of representation; however, she points neither to the artificiality of the likeness nor to the grandeur of the original. Instead, she deftly balances subjective symbolism and objective reality, moving her work from the conceptual to the sculptural. The essential physical presence and beauty of her extracted cosmos place it with the best of Minimalism, while the soft tactility of materials and emphasis on process recall Post-Minimalism. When encountering Mirra's poetic fragment, viewers, standing at different vantage points, gaze downward upon the heavens, not upward from below. Here, at the horizon of Mirra's flattened hemisphere of sky, we discover a contemplative space of our own.

—Susan Snodgrass