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DIANA THATER: THE SYMPATHETIC IMAGINATION

October 29, 2016 – January 8, 2017



The **Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago** presents **Diana Thater: The Sympathetic Imagination**, the artist's first comprehensive museum exhibition in the United States. Among the most important artists to emerge during the 1990s, Los Angeles-based artist Diana Thater has created groundbreaking and influential works of art in film, video, and installation that challenge the ways in which moving images are experienced. Her dynamic, immersive installations address key issues that span the realms of film, museum exhibitions, the natural sciences, and contemporary culture through the use of movement, scale, and architecture. The exhibition, comprising 22 works from the early 1990s through 2015, was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and is co-curated by Lynne Cooke, Senior Curator for Special Projects in Modern Art at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and Christine Y. Kim, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at LACMA. The Chicago presentation is coordinated by Chief Curator Michael Darling and Curatorial Fellow Joey Orr, and is on view October 29, 2016 through January 8, 2017.

The primary emphasis of Thater's work resides in the tension between the natural environment and mediated reality, and by extension, between the domesticated and wild, and science and magic. Drawing on a wide variety of sources, including literature, animal behavior, mathematics, and sociology, her evocative and layered imagery engages its surroundings to create complex relationships between time and space. Among the standouts in this 25-year survey of Thater's career are *Oo Fifi, Five Days in Claude Monet's Garden, Part 2* (1992) and *Abyss of Light* (1993).

Thater's work speaks to key issues such as ethics, bio-ecology, the environment, earth sciences, and the Anthropocene. A hallmark of the artist's innovative installations is the nuanced merging of projected imagery to an architectural site so that viewers are literally immersed in the work. Experiencing these installations kinetically, viscerally, and psychically rather than by observing passively from a distance, visitors enter into an active dialogue with work that is challenging and engaging.

Depicting a range of natural phenomena—such as dolphins in their fluid underwater world; honeybees, who communicate through dancing; monkeys and humans bridging a nebulous boundary between the tamed and the wild in Jaipur's Galtaji Temple—Thater's works explore the subjectivity of animals and the complex relationships humans have constructed with nature.

Drawing on the medium's artistic potential by magnifying video's lo-fi and composite qualities, Thater often exaggerates synthetic color and pixilation until the effect approaches the hand-painted. In her breakthrough work *Oo Fifi, Five Days in Claude Monet's Garden, Part 1 and Part 2*, created from footage shot at the Fondation Claude Monet in Giverny, France, the video's primary colors (RGB) were partially reconstructed or projected separately in order to enhance the medium's impressionistic effects. As in other works in the exhibition, *Oo Fifi* also introduces an interactive dimension, by overlaying visitors' shadows rendered in various hues onto the projected imagery.

Thater's *Delphine* (1999), filmed in the Caribbean, depicts dolphins in their natural habitat. Shot both from above and from a diver's perspective, the footage has been divided into four projections. The sun provides an important orientation point: all underwater shots directed upward are shot with video while the downward-facing angles are documented with film, subtly underscoring differences in vantage point. In addition to the projected images, the installation includes a discrete video wall comprising nine monitors that shows an image of the sun shot from a NASA telescope. While the video wall adds an additional conceptual element to the installation, it also helps to ground the viewer in the seemingly unbounded environment, a luminous counterpoint to the expansive and potentially destabilizing projections.

knots + surfaces (2001) was inspired by the dance of honeybees, in which worker bees signal the availability of, and distance to, food sources to their fellow bees. This complex mode of communication has been linked by anthropologists and mathematicians to the geometry of six-dimensional space. The artwork embodies a single perspective vantage point. From that specific spot in the installation, visitors see a video projection of giant bees moving over five static hexagons. The bees' movement becomes

abstracted as the hexagons are distorted into a play of colored shapes that bound over the floor, walls, corners, and ceiling. As a counterpoint to these projections, Thater introduces a bulky, freestanding four-by-four monitor “video wall” displaying an orange flower.

The most recent work included in the exhibition, *Life Is a Time-Based Medium* (2015), was filmed at the Galtaji Temple—a Hindu pilgrimage site—in Jaipur, India. A monumental installation, it conflates the projected architecture of the temple with that of the gallery in which it is shown. Focusing on the behavior of the resident monkeys, Thater’s work questions distinctions between the tame and wild by reference to the divine status of the animals in Hinduism.

About Diana Thater

Born in 1962 in San Francisco, Diana Thater studied art history at New York University, before receiving her MFA from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, where she is currently the faculty chair of the Graduate Art department. Over the past decade, her work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions at prominent institutions that include the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane (2011); Santa Monica Museum of Art, California (2010); Kunsthaus Graz, Austria; Natural History Museum, London (both 2009); Kunsthalle Bremen, Germany; Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, Germany (both 2004); Dia Center for the Arts, New York (2001); Secession, Vienna (2000); and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (1995).

In 2014, Thater was awarded a California Community Foundation Fellowship for Visual Artists. Other notable awards and fellowships include a 2011 Award for Artistic Innovation from the Center for Cultural Innovation, Los Angeles, as well as a James D. Phelan Award in Film and Video (2006), a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (2005), and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1993). Also renowned as a writer, educator, and curator, Thater lives and works in Los Angeles.

MCA Talk: Diana Thater

Saturday, October 29, 3 pm

Artist Diana Thater discusses her exhibition with Chief Curator Michael Darling and Joey Orr, the MCA Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow.

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Image: Diana Thater, *Delphine*, 1999. Installation view, *Diana Thater: The Sympathetic Imagination*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2015–16. © Diana Thater. Photo © Fredrik Nilsen.

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sculpture garden are open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 am to 5 pm and Tuesday from 10 am to 8 pm. The museum is closed on Monday. Tuesdays are Community Free Days with free admission for Illinois residents. Suggested general admission is \$12 for adults and \$7 for students and seniors. Children 12 years of age and under, MCA members, and members of the military are admitted free. Information about MCA exhibitions, programs, and special events is available on the MCA website at mcachicago.org or by phone at 312.280.2660.