

Museums

'Days of Endless Time' at the Hirshhorn examines our need for nature to soothe us



A still photo taken from artist Guido van der Werve's video work, "Nummer Negen (#9) The Day I Didn't Turn With the World." (Guido van der Werve)



By **Philip Kennicott** Art and architecture critic October 23



If you believe you have a soul, then likely you believe that Nature is a balm for all that ails it. But both are fictional constructs, drawing on ideas borrowed from religion, philosophy, poetry and the arts. Many of the works on view in the Hirshhorn Museum's exhibition "[Days of Endless Time](#)" reflect the sadness and anxiety we feel when we face up to these facts dispassionately and honestly.

When the exhibition was announced, as part of the Hirshhorn's 40th anniversary season, it sounded like an exercise in high-end art therapy. The works are drawn from top international video artists, including Douglas Gordon, David Claerbout, Robert Wilson and Eija-Liisa Ahtila, and are offered as responses to "the frantic, 24/7 flow of information and the ephemerality of digital media." The show's themes, according to the museum's Web site, "include escape, solitude, enchantment, and the thrall of nature."

Spend time with them, however, and it seems more like a show about the impossibility of escape, the disenchantment of solitude and the astonishing amount of work and self-discipline it takes to find ourselves truly in thrall to nature. The first work visitors see, Su-Mei Tse's 2003 video "L'Echo," shows a woman in a red dress, sitting on a chair, playing the cello on a brilliant patch of green grass; beyond lies a world of precipitous alpine chasms and rugged mountains. Perhaps this recalls the 18th-century idea of the sublime —the over-awing power of boundless nature, yet nature that has no power over us. But the colors and the staging of the scene leave us uneasy. The green is too green and the placement of the human figure, upstage right, feels contrived.

You can read this impressive visual spectacle as a woman using music to interact with the magnificence of nature; or as a video so artfully constructed that it is meant to call attention to its amped-up artificiality. In other works, human beings are also present, and their presence makes our relationship to natural beauty far more complicated than that often found in photographs, especially the slick glossy images of nature one sees in calendars or travel magazines. In Guido van der Werve's 2007 "Nummer Negen (#9) The Day I Didn't Turn With the World," a solitary figure stands at the North Pole, surrounded by a desolate landscape of ice and snow. Composed from still images stitched together into an almost nine-minute video, the figure seems to jerk and twitch. The conceit is that the artist has spent a 24-hour period making slow, clockwise turns every so often, suggesting that he has remained fixed in his relationship to the earth's diurnal motion.

But the effect is a figure animated by some irrational, spasmodic motion, like a puppet suspended in space and subjected to electrical torture. He may be self-consciously striving to be at one with the motion of the planet, but he doesn't appear to be at one with nature. The herky-jerky quality of the artist's figure, his solitude, and almost preening ambition to master a basic, planetary force, feels like a metaphor for consciousness itself. Often, in the presence of great natural beauty, we sense our inadequacy to comprehend it and intense loneliness as we strive and fail to dissolve into its vastness. We hope to forget ourselves, yet become more keenly aware of our mind's capacity for self-distraction.

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Su-Mei Tse, "L'Echo," 2003. (Su-Mei Tse and Peter Blum Gallery)

There is no dissolving the sense of self, except perhaps through the occasional respite of meditation. Perhaps that explains one of the smaller works in the show, Siebren Versteeg's 2005 "Neither There nor There," which gives us a double image of the artist sitting and checking his cellphone. One image is constantly dissolving into black dots that then reform to flesh out the other one, as if he is caught in a constant loop of pixelated transference. No matter how desperately we seek a more intense, more real, more present sense of our own

mind, it flies before us, reforming into yet more fugitive thoughts, yet more futile introspection. Looking inward, we might paraphrase Gertrude Stein: “There’s no here, here.”

The crux of this show may be one piece that isn’t video art. “Shadowplay,” a work from 2012-14 by Hans-Peter Feldmann, uses children’s toys, figurines, dolls and other found objects to choreograph moving shadows on a wall opposite the viewer. Eight carousels, lit by lamps, create a hypnotic dance of images, an airplane endlessly circling, the Eiffel Tower turning in space, a gun ominously brandishing itself at everything and nothing. The work invokes childhood, and with (perhaps) a sidelong reference to Proust’s “Remembrance of Things Past,” in which a young boy tries fretfully to sleep while a magic lantern casts dancing colors on the wall. But it also reenacts and reinterprets one of the foundational metaphors of Western rationality, Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, in which shadows play a fundamental role.

Plato asks us to imagine a cave, in which people are chained in darkness, watching a play of shadows on a wall. He uses the figure to suggest the limits of our ordinary perception, the possibility of unmediated truth, and the danger of seeking it. If the captives could see the source of the images — the light and the people manipulating the three-dimensional objects behind them — they would instantly understand the hollowness of their shadow understanding. And if they ascended from the cave to the real world and enlightenment, they would never again be able to believe in the shadow play experienced by the poor cave-dwellers.

Feldmann subverts this by showing both the shadows and the rather cheap, even tawdry means of their production. He underscores this deflation of the shadow play by including random objects on the table, leftover things, not part of the spectacle, but seemingly forgotten by the puppet masters who set the shadows in motion. Plato’s shadow-casting fire is not behind us, unseen, but the obvious effect of lamps right in front of us.

The world is what we see, hear, taste and touch; it can be measured, manipulated and transformed. It can also be polluted, abused and destroyed. But the whole apparatus of our emotional relationship to nature is entirely our creation. That doesn’t mean it’s not a happy creation, a necessary fantasy, a gift we give ourselves out of the depths of our dire loneliness and spiritual poverty. Spending time alone in the great outdoors is one of the most powerful placebos in the emotional medicine chest.

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But for a placebo to work, we must constantly forget the deception involved. David Claerbout’s “Travel,” constructed over 17 years beginning in 1996, takes viewers on an imaginary tour of a mostly idyllic landscape, animated by every cliché he can think of, yet, somehow, leaving us with a sense of rapture. A dappled path leads into a rich forest, shafts of light stream through the gloaming, brooks burble, leaves tremble and limpid pools cast a spell of stillness.

Romanticism has been distilled to something sweet, treachery and powerfully intoxicating. If, at the end, the presence of a water tower or grain elevator in the distance disturbs the perfection of it all, who cares? We have learned, through other works in this strange and captivating show, that our love of illusions transcends disillusionment.

Days of Endless Time

Through April 12, 2015 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue at Seventh Street SW. Call 202-633-1000 or visit www.hirshhorn.si.edu. Free.