

ART

Ah, wilderness

Nature—forests, fires, Flushing Meadows—meets culture in Diana Thater's installations **By Andrea K. Scott**



John Pilson, stills from *Hic et Ubique*, 2004.

If Dia teamed up with the Discovery Channel, the results might resemble Diana Thater's video installations, investigations of the natural world that owe a debt to the rigors of both Bruce Nauman and structuralist film. Thater would no doubt take issue with the television reference, since it smacks of entertainment and that's the last thing she's after. Instead, her installations and freestanding works, now on view in two shows at David Zwirner and Zwirner & Wirth, attempt to dismantle the slick spectacle intrinsic to so much contemporary video. For 15 years, she's been documenting nature, often when it's subject to human intervention (trained wolves, a zoo-bound zebra, a forest in an arboretum). Of course, the act of viewing is itself an intervention, a fact Thater underscores by locating her projectors where viewers' movements can block their beams of light, interrupting the seamless flow of imagery.

These paired shows, which include three site-specific installations and a hodgepodge of

double- and triple-channel works made between 1994 and 2003, are not the artist's strongest. Nothing here approaches the dizzying, color-saturated wonderland of the kaleidoscopic installation about the flight patterns of bees—and the nature of time and space—at Dia in 2001. *Unisphere* (1998), a two-channel video shot at the former site of the 1964 World's Fair in Queens and installed uptown, is so weak that it's anomalous. More successful is Thater's newest installation (on view in Chelsea), *Continuous. Contiguous* (2004),

shot in Panama using a 300-foot crane installed in the rain-forest. Three plasma screens on the floor play footage

of butterflies, an anteater and a cranky-looking monkey, while a pair of projections run on opposite corners of the room. One features footage of the crane itself, while the second depicts the leafy canopy, shot at the dizzying pace of a Tilt-A-Whirl.

Thater's program is ambitious, and the recent tsunami, a tragic reminder of the devastating power

of nature, attunes us to her subject. I am aware of the danger of projecting affinities where none exist (in the days after 9/11, I could find elegiac relevance in a gumball). But in two related works installed uptown at Zwirner & Wirth, collectively titled *White is the Color*, Thater specifically engages the idea of the sublime—the terror and pleasure we feel when nature is so overwhelming it transcends beauty. (The distinction between what beautiful and what's sublime has held artists, painters mostly—from the Hudson River School to the Abstract Expressionists—in its sway since the concept was first mapped out by philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant in the mid-18th century.)

The first part of *White is the Color* is projected on the facade of the gallery's 69th Street building and is only visible after dark (the gallery turns the piece on around 4:30pm every day and shuts it off in the morning). Billows of white clouds slowly fade in and out across the windows like a Magritte painting sprung to life. The scene calls to mind Barnett Newman's line about the sublime: "To me, Burke reads like a surrealist manual." But where's the convulsive beauty (to borrow a phrase from the *Surrealist Manifesto*) in garden-variety clouds? The answer lies in a conceptual *trompe l'oeil*—Thater's footage was not shot looking up at the sky, but rather looking down from a mountaintop in Southern California at the forest fires that ravaged the region in 2002. While Bill Viola tries to invoke the metaphysical by plunging angels into tanks like some waterlogged Christmas special, the infinite mysteries of the physical world are good enough for Thater.

The second part of *White* is installed in the rear corner of the gallery, where white clouds drift along the wall and onto the ceiling. Nearby, a white fluorescent tube rests on the floor, like a Dan Flavin sculpture that's slipped off the wall. But just as the clouds on the wall aren't really clouds (whether or not you know their catastrophic source), Thater is using a standard-issue lighting fixture, not incorporating a Minimalist artwork into her piece (the tip-off is the cord that trails to an outlet). The Flavin allusion is telling: For both artists, site and installation, content and material are interdependent, revealing that in art as in nature—and even in that despicable television—it all boils down to light. **n**

Review

Diana Thater
David Zwirner (see Chelsea)
Zwirner & Wirth (see Uptown /
Madison Avenue)
Both, though Feb 6.