

# LANDSCAPE IMMERSIONS: LYNNE MARSH'S PERFORMATIVE SPACES



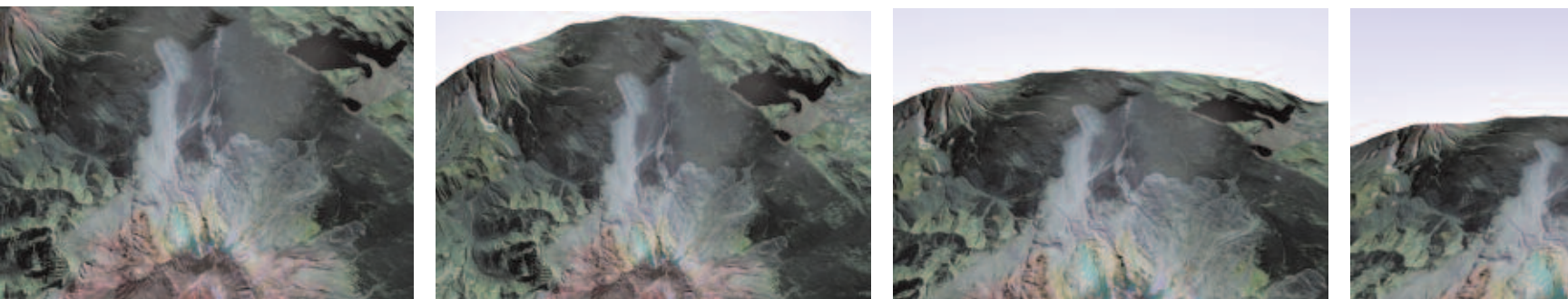
TEXT / JOHANNE SLOAN

Pictures of volcanoes are necessarily landscapes-in-motion. What looks to be a still image is not so. Beneath the surface of an ordinary-looking and apparently stationary mountain, something elemental is stirring. Lynne Marsh's *Crater*, 2005, was recently installed in a large room at the Cinémathèque Québécoise in Montreal. Three curved screens formed an enclosure wherein several people could stand, while images flowed across the screens to create a panoramic illusion of circling above Mount Saint Helens' volcanic crater. This simulation of the volcano originated with NASA scientists, who used a "Thermal Infrared Multispectral Scanner" to create a pictorial equivalent of the land mass' varying temperatures and densities. The artist has taken this imagery and further manipulated it, doubling it (the projection appeared on both sides of the screens), and adding an electronic soundtrack. At various moments, then, the images flowing by us have been subjected to a range of interventions, for scientific, aesthetic, and perhaps ideological purposes. Eventually, Marsh makes her moving panorama tilt, rock, and swirl at high speed, resulting in a disintegration of the projected image, and at the same time disorienting the viewer positioned at the epicenter of these escalating special effects.

Mandated to preserve and document film culture, the Cinémathèque thus provided an apt setting for Marsh's installation, which interrogates some of the boundaries of contemporary cinematic experience.

*Crater's* viewer-image meltdown is reminiscent of Michael Snow's famous experimental film *La Région Centrale*, 1970, which starts with a slow panoramic sweep of remote scenery, brought to a point of frenzied unintelligibility. The landscape imagery which provides the point of departure for *La Région Centrale* is a conventionally realistic piece of film footage, though. While *Crater* does rely on moving, film-like images, it begins with a highly artificial and already-mediated environment, drawn from twenty-first century cyberculture. As with much of Marsh's artwork to date, we immediately recognize a kinship to both the fictionalized landscapes created for scientific research or military strategy, and the digitized worlds crafted for entertainment purposes, in myriad computer games. The images' colors and textures contribute to this game-like quality: clashing magentas, violets, acid yellows, and other electric colors impart a familiarly ambiguous texture/resolution to this geographic terrain. Certain commonalities between the artworks by Snow and Marsh are nonetheless noteworthy.

inside front cover and above: above: Lynne Marsh, installation view of *Crater*, 2005, projected panoramic installation, 3 curved screens, surround sound, and fuchsia lights, diameter: 16 feet [courtesy of the artist; photo: Mathieu Laverdière] / opposite: Lynne Marsh, image of 3D model for *Crater*, 2005, projected panoramic installation (animator: Sol Rogers; courtesy of the artist)



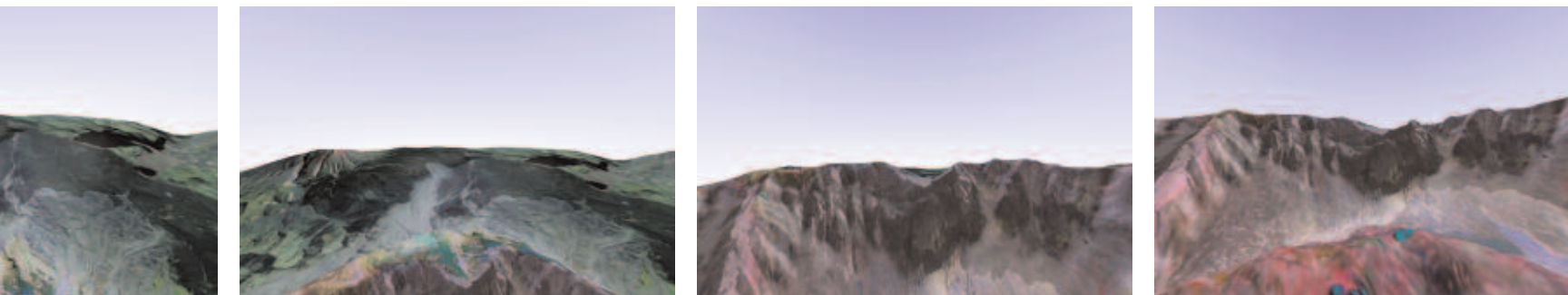
thy. Both *La Région Centrale* and *Crater* imply an absent human consciousness instead of representing a particular body. Both use existing visual technologies to challenge the very idea of visual mastery. Both rely on sublime disorientation as an effect which cannot, however, be definitively attributed to either technology or nature.

Marsh's installation at the Cinémathèque also evoked some of the elaborate visual contrivances and inventions of the nineteenth century. Panoramas, dioramas, cosmoramas, cycloramas, and other related apparatus anticipated the emergence of the cinema, as they sought to expand the perceptual effects of the conventional two-dimensional picture. A still image would sometimes be animated by light and sound. At times screens would slide and shift position. On other occasions the viewers themselves would be displaced, through features such as moving seats. Crucially, the early panorama sought to surpass the usual expectations of a viewer confronting a still, two-dimensional image. The panoramic image is never simply in front of you. It exceeds your field of vision, and surrounds you. You're inside it. Marsh is certainly not the only contemporary artist or scholar to employ a retrospective gaze, revisiting the early days of proto-photographic or proto-cinematic practices to shed new light on our contemporary image-world. The historian of photography Geoffrey Batchen, for instance, has not only investigated specific experiments and chemical processes which contributed to the photograph's emergence, but has also attempted to describe a more ineffable "desire for photography" which came to lodge itself in the imaginations of so many artists, writers, scientists, and inventors.<sup>1</sup> Oliver Grau has argued that early panoramas now fascinate us because they seem to prefigure the impulse towards interactivity and immersion which is so

prevalent in our current visual culture.<sup>2</sup> Marsh's artwork can be regarded as a timely intervention into this ever-evolving "desire for immersion."

Immersion implies the permeability of bodies, objects and space. Marsh's work does not deliver immersion as a *fait accompli*, but rather, explores the limits of figure-ground relationships. Standing inside *Crater's* screen-enclosure, the visitor tries to get her bearings while necessarily becoming a "figure" measured against a mutable and ever-moving "ground." This physically-present visitor comes to stand in for the avatar-like figures which are prominent in Marsh's earlier work. In works such as *Cowgirl & Future Stories*, 1998, *Venus... I See Blue*, 1998, *Calling*, 2000, and *Screeners*, 2002, looped video projections show single or multiple figures, against a sequence of environments that are difficult to categorize, as they can variously be construed as landscape, extraterrestrial space, cyberspace, magnified views, or merely decorative visual environments. Nowhere, though, do these indeterminate environment/spaces function as mere backdrops to the human action in the foreground. Instead, in scenarios reminiscent of the gaming world, the spatial environment becomes a realm of action and fantasy, activated by a player/avatar.

In *Cowgirl & Future Stories*, a single costumed body surges across and over a spectacular space/ground that resembles an uninhabited planet. The background footage is of the planet Mars, courtesy of NASA once again. The planet's orangey-gold surface is modulated by topographical variations—hillocks, ravines, depressions and plains. As is often the case with computer simulations, though, the image's imperfect resolution means that the object-world can easily and suddenly become strange and uncanny. One moment the background is



visually convincing. Textures and surface appearances then morph, and this world is instantly drained of its reality effect. Without warning, the planet's surface has become spongiform. It is suspiciously porous and pixellated. Substance dissolves into code.

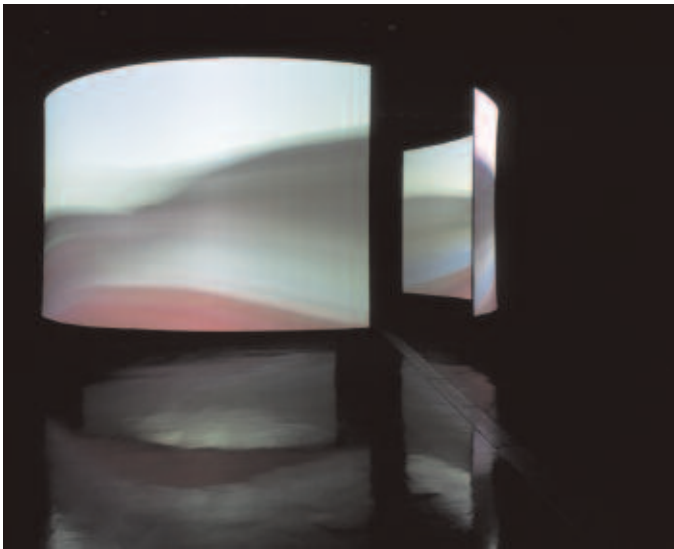
Texture is crucial to the establishment of verisimilitude, especially when immersion is promised. It is the litmus test for the visual articulation of digital data. As Grau has suggested, immersive effects are most impressive when they "appeal not only to the eyes but to all other senses so that the impression arises of being completely in an artificial world."<sup>3</sup> Texture is how the visual becomes polysensorial. While NASA never publicly divulges how it enhances its raw material, we do know that the gaming industry has promoted the development of specialized cadres of artist/technicians, including such experts as "lighting artists," "texture artists," "environment artists," and "character modelers." An Electronic Arts job description for a "character modeler" states that the successful candidate will be expected to "build basic textures, apply textures to models; provide feedback to texture artists as necessary," and further, to "build textures that are resolution independent."<sup>4</sup> The gaming universe is evidently subjected to a high degree of anxiety about texture, and its ability to be "resolution independent." Without texture, representation remains at the level of the animated cartoon—the surface texture of living bodies remains undifferentiated from that of the object world into which they continually crash. Yet, some day, it is promised, artificial worlds will be ultra-realistic, ultra-immersive, and fully sensorial. This preoccupation with texture, coupled with the desire for immersion, suggests that we are living through a pivotal moment in the rendition of realistic effects, and in the definition of realism. As cinema and photography

are reconfigured by their increasing reliance on digitized special effects—in the names of otherworldly fantasy, scientific accuracy, or gritty authenticity—the grammar of realism is inevitably, and irreversibly, transformed.

Wearing a transparent plastic suit over her super-heroine leotard, *Cowgirl & Future Stories'* space cowgirl descends to the planet's surface, practices her lassoing, and then resumes her body-surfing through space. This shiny piece of costuming suggests that the environment within which the avatar moves, and into which she metaphorically leads the viewer, is potentially dangerous or toxic—not only because this is ostensibly the planet Mars, but because Marsh has deliberately immersed her heroine in an artificial environment that is unstable, and unusually prone to mutation. Likewise, the digital simulations that stand in for Mars, Venus, or Los Angeles (the background in *LA, 2003*), can so easily become soggy and porous illusions. The spatial envelope that is not "resolution dependent" surely poses a threat to a vulnerable human body, and so it is that costumes are necessary, in the way that even the skimpiest of super-hero costumes is always necessary. The costume functions as a prophylactic, protecting the vulnerable body within from outside violence and toxicity. But the costume signifies in other ways, because it is inevitably a fashion statement as well. Within any given social milieu, the fashionably costumed body is empowered through its constructed silhouette.

The background environment in Marsh's video-loops is sometimes rudimentary. In *Calling*, this degree-zero landscape consists of a mottled beige ground or planet-like surface repeatedly traversed by a single female figure. This character is tall, slim, and dressed in a bright blue jumpsuit with matching headgear and goggles. She moves

above: Lynne Marsh, stills from *Crater*, 2005, projected panoramic installation (animator: Sol Rogers; courtesy of the artist)



towards the picture plane—that is to say, towards us—then turns and retreats towards the horizon-line which defines the rear of the fictional space. Back and forth, back and forth, and then she collapses. As with the worlds of videogames, however, this apparent expiration or "death" does not signal the end. Rather, it is merely one of a predetermined sequence of gestures and actions which characters are programmed to perform. The viewer can therefore be sure of a repetition of every gesture, including that crumple to the ground, a miraculous resuscitation, and a return to the paced-out measurement of the space. Somehow, though, Marsh has managed to imbue this cartoony character with pathos, and it is easy to construct a narrative following the conventional storylines of the science-fiction genre—a renegade space-traveler got stranded on this god-forsaken patch of wilderness. When she moves yet again towards the horizon, we might even imagine that there is another world, beyond this denuded and apocalyptic one, to which she might escape.

Although Marsh has created moving figures in these video projections, their actions are occasionally slowed down and stuttering, in a way that is typical of digital media. Then, momentarily and perhaps accidentally, a still image appears. These brief moments of stillness are nonetheless powerful. It is also true that whenever Marsh's artwork is reproduced in formats such as this magazine, there is also, necessarily, a hiatus of movement. We see a figure suspended above an amorphous and perhaps sublime spatial field. Such images often provoke comparison with the long history of landscape painting and, in particular, images of single figures interacting with and responding to natural environments. The extraordinary paintings of the nineteenth-century German artist Casper David Friedrich, for instance, have human figures with their backs to the viewer, avatar-style. But these figures very conspicuously do not move; they are forever rapt, in a prolonged moment of stillness and contemplation. Such paintings remind us of other dreams of immersion, very different from those of the soldier or gamer who, determined to remain uncontaminated by his surroundings, repeatedly acts to eradicate the elements of that environment which he deems alien or monstrous. Such paranoid scenarios imply that a high psychic price can be paid for the privilege of immersion.

In Marsh's work the repetition of gesture, replication of spaces, and evidence of cloning can all have dystopian connotations. *Calling's* single pacing figure is multiplied in *Screeners*, where it constitutes a cloned phalanx zooming through space at high speed, with military

Above, top to bottom: Lynne Marsh, installation views of *Crater*, 2005, projected panoramic installation, 3 curved screens, surround sound, and fuchsia lights, diameter: 16 feet (courtesy of the artist; top photo: Adrian Buitenheis; bottom photo: Mathieu Laverdière) / opposite, top to bottom: Lynne Marsh, video still from *Cowgirl & Future Stories*, 1998, continuous looped projection with sound, dimensions variable (courtesy of the artist); Lynne Marsh, video still from *Screeners*, 2002, continuous looped projection with sound, dimensions variable (courtesy of the artist); Lynne Marsh, video still from *Ballroom*, 2004, continuous looped projection with sound, dimensions variable (courtesy of the artist)

precision. The formation's regularity suggests a territory to be conquered, and a mission to be accomplished. But Marsh undercuts the potentially sinister implications of such scenarios, often with humorous details. These ladies perform their flight maneuvers with the pleasing synchronicity of a Busby Berkeley choreography. Scrutiny then reveals that their spacecraft of choice are bargain-basement plastic sleds. It is through such moments of stillness, disjuncture, or humor, that Marsh's vignettes register their aesthetic distance from the everyday world of digitized spatiality. These moments are also how Marsh succeeds in reviving some of the emancipatory promises of cyberspace, of space travel, and of pop culture.

If the question of immersion pertains most directly to the worlds of games and cyberspace, it is interesting to note that Marsh's recent video-loop, *Ballroom*, 2004, avoids appropriated simulation, while furthering her exploration the figure-ground or body-space problem. In an old-fashioned ballroom in England, filled with shimmering lights, an elegantly clad woman is suspended upside down from the central chandelier. The video simply shows this female figure, suspended and continually spinning. Initially it might seem that this artwork doesn't grapple with the same issues of spatial illusionism and perceptual breakdown, because we are much more likely to accept the photographic and social truthfulness of this place. The coherence of the scene is, however, an illusion that can only be sustained by the outside viewer. If we imaginatively put ourselves in the place of this twirling protagonist and see the world through her eyes, the surrounding environment begins to disintegrate, just as did the panoramic volcano of *Crater*. Maybe this is simply what it's like to be immersed in the everyday world.

#### NOTES

1. Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: the Conception of Photography*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997.
2. Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003.
3. Grau, 14.
4. See <http://jobs.ea.com/>

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LYNNE MARSH is currently working on a new video installation for her upcoming exhibition at Platform in London [April 21—May 21, 2006]. Her multimedia installation *Crater* was exhibited at the Cinémathèque Québécoise in collaboration with Le Mois de la Photo in Montréal. In 2005, her work was also featured in *Video Unplugged*, Galleri S.E, Bergen, Norway; *Dislocate*, Hit Gallery, Bratislava, Slovakia and Globe Gallery, Newcastle, UK; and *London Movies*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels. Lynne Marsh lives and works in London and Montreal.

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See the online version of this feature at [www.artpapers.org](http://www.artpapers.org) for more of Lynne Marsh's work.