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SUMMER PREVIEW
50 SHOWS WORLDWIDE



OPENINGS

Julia Bryan-Wilson on
Lisi Raskin

LISI RASKIN ONCE SPENT AN ENTIRE MONTH looking for nuclear submarines. The New York-based artist was on a residency in 2005 at Cove Park in Scotland, which overlooks a Trident submarine docking base at Loch Long. While she never caught a glimpse of one of these billion-dollar machines slithering through the water, her attempt was in perfect keeping with her ongoing investigations into the effects of nuclear culture on the landscape. The installation that resulted from Raskin's month-long vigil, *(Remote Location) Observation Station*, 2005, at Glasgow's Transmission Gallery, featured a video in which she playfully became the submarine she longed to witness: She holds a cardboard cutout of a submarine against her side as she crawls back and forth in front of a pond; like a kid staging battle scenes in the bathtub, she makes beeping sounds to simulate the sub's mechanical noises. The video was shown in a ramshackle watchtower; in another part of the gallery, a gray plasticine form rose up from the floor as if it were a vessel emerging out of the sea.

As these intentionally naive re-creations demonstrate, Raskin is less concerned with faithfully transcribing atomic culture than with plumbing the ways in which it haunts our collective imagination. She grew up during the Reagan era in Miami, near the Turkey Point nuclear power plant, but became attuned to the time's rhetoric of apocalypse only after watching the legendary post-nuclear attack television movie *The Day After* (1983)—whose bleak vision she recalled after September 11, 2001, when she was in her first year of the MFA program at Columbia University in New York. The frenzy regarding national security that followed reactivated her adolescent fixations on ticking bombs and lingering radioactivity. Since then, her art has delved explicitly into how these issues reverberate within spaces both psychic and geopolitical.

Raskin works across media, often creating site-specific installations that mix fact and science fiction. For her Columbia thesis in 2003, she made use of an alter ego called Herr Doktor Wolfgang Hauptman II, described by the artist as a "mad-eyed scientist" whose great discovery is TerraClear, a "thermophilic fungus" designed to decontaminate radioactive material. This feat of hypothetical biological engineering later appeared in '84-*Ignalina Heights*, 2003, an interactive installation Raskin created in collaboration with her brother for the group exhibition "24/7" at the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, Lithuania: The work comprised a mock sales office for a housing development (Ignalina Heights) on the grounds of Lithuania's nuclear power plant, newly "cleaned" by Hauptman's fungus—a postutopian, protocapitalist Superfund site if ever there was one. A third project that year, *The Research Station*, shown at the High Desert Test Sites 3 in Joshua Tree, California, showcased Hauptman's various futuristic inventions, including a personal battery pack modeled on a nuclear reactor. Raskin's tent outpost, with hazard tape and a makeshift Geiger counter, alluded to Joshua Tree's location in the atomic West. While artist Mel Chin has collaborated with actual scientists who use plants to remove environmental toxins (*Revival Field*, 1990–93), Raskin, with her fictive projects, hyperbolically *performs*, rather than enacts, research. Whereas Chin specializes in engaged community practices, Raskin stages theatrical demonstrations that send up zealous claims of technological progress.

This performance works on several registers. Her persona—Hauptman—tests the limits of the audience's credulity with fantastical "what if" scenarios about removed pollutants. (Such speculative situations, of course, are at the heart of the cold-war mentality, with its intricately plotted war games.) And viewers are asked to suspend their disbelief about the viability of Hauptman not only as a scientist but also as a man. Raskin's drag performance is a thick and elaborate pun, riffing on the doubling



This page, from top: Lisi Raskin, *Portal 3*, 2004, mixed media, 10 x 15 x 15'. Lisi Raskin, *Suite U-234*, 2005, mixed media, 8 x 8 x 8'. Lisi Raskin, *Auf/Zu (Open/Closed)*, 2005, crayon, colored pencil, and marker on paper, mounted on board, 24 x 34". Opposite page, from top: Lisi Raskin, *The Research Station*, 2003, mixed media. Installation view, High Desert Test Sites 3, Joshua Tree, California. Lisi Raskin as Herr Doktor Wolfgang Hauptman II, Prentiss Hall, Columbia University, New York, 2003. Photo: Halsey Rodman. Lisi Raskin, *Bomb*, 2003, mixed media, 22 x 18 x 18".



of nuclear power and nuclear family. Her gender passing queerly cites, and potentially detonates, the rigid heteronormativity enforced by the nuclear family.

Raskin soon left Hauptman behind to pursue new investigative methods. A trip to Tennessee's Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the site of critical plutonium and uranium research for the Manhattan Project, inspired the artist's 2004 installation at Socrates Sculpture Park in New York, *Portal 3*, included in the group show "Field: Science, Technology and Nature." Mimicking the lab's sealed-off areas of hazardous materials, Raskin dumped swirling globs of paint on the ground, Lynda Benglis style, then surrounded the spill with an exaggerated level of security, including a fence, some barbed wire, a siren, and a coded keypad. Yet the warning signs were drawn with Sharpie, crayon, and pencil, and the whole apparatus had the cobbled-together feel of a tomboy's secret fort. That the elements were so clearly handmade reflects Raskin's increasing disinterest in artistic simulation. After a sculptural component of her MFA thesis, *Bomb*, 2003—featuring bottles, a fireproof metal can, and wire—prompted a weekend security guard at Columbia's LeRoy Neiman Gallery to call the police, Raskin lost her taste for the terrors and thrills of the almost real. This sets her apart from artists such as Gregory Green, who creates exact replicas of nuclear devices—minus the plutonium—getting him into legal trouble with postal workers and airport screeners. Raskin sees these scare tactics as inherently fraught, given the positions of those who must police the boundary between art and threat; as she explains, "I am not interested in being a provocateur pitted against the working class." Her deliberately clumsy fabrication registers the horrors of potential annihilation with more of a psychological charge than steely-eyed replication.

Rather than seeking verisimilitude, Raskin combines crafty manipulation with serious attention to detail in her large-scale environments. *Space Ship*, 2004, is a foam and fabric version of an interplanetary rocket whose high-tech buttons and knobs are schematically rendered with markers; *Suite U-234*, 2005, is a hexagonal control room made of tinfoil but featuring real '60s-era control panels from a defunct chemical-engineering laboratory. This tension between the factual and the pretend is also evident in drawings such as *Auf/Zu (Open/Closed)*, 2005. Included in the 2005 group show "Atomica" at Lombard-Freid Projects, New York, the work is a painstaking depiction of a military chamber done in crayon and colored pencil. The elementary-school materials and wobbly lines belie the accuracy of these works, which are filled with details culled from the documentary photography of Paul Shambroom and Robert Polidori, as well as from Raskin's own trip to former East German nuclear bunkers. Her photographs of a railway yard (where she was nearly arrested for trespassing) and images from a government pamphlet on a 1955 nuclear test were the source material for her collaged drawings in *Switchyard*, 2007, an installation currently on view at Guild & Greyskul in New York. This direct appropriation recalls the works of painter Joy Garnett, whose imagery is derived from declassified governmental documents.

Though the cold war may be over, we are still shadowed by anxieties—however potentially trumped up—of dirty bombs, WMDs, and rogue warheads. This subject is undeniably riveting, and Raskin returns to it compulsively. Maybe, however, in her month at Loch Long, she both did and did not want to see a deadly submarine; the rush of adrenaline that comes from witnessing destructive power up close can veer into obsessive panic. Raskin's re-creations of bombs and bunkers thus function like protective amulets, defusing and demystifying their potency as shared nightmares. Her fascination with the nuclear sublime, an awe tempered by fear, continues to lead her to far-flung places. For her next project, she will expand her explorations further still. She plans to travel north of the Arctic Circle to photograph Esrange, the Swedish Space Corporation launchpad. What she will make out of this research journey remains to be seen, but it will likely extend her studies of the global consequences of the corporate and scientific colonization of space. If outer space is the next frontier for militarization and entrepreneurial ventures, it is also, by virtue of its very remoteness, one more field of the imagination, an empty terrain in which scientists and artists alike might map a possible future. □

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