

# Are Closer Than, Lyla Rye

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Essay by Stephanie Cormier

It is almost impossible to clearly see and understand our present time while we are immersed in it - the full brightness and newness of now. It is only with some retreat, into the shadows, a drawing away from that brilliance of now that we can begin to assemble a truer picture. Just like the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben suggests, "The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure. The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present."

This thought from Agamben strikes me when Lyla Rye talks to me about her video projection in the exhibition *Are Closer Than* at General Hardware Contemporary in Toronto. "I overlay these two types of footage using two projectors, creating a physical superimposition where brightness obliterates while darkness reveals." My mind opens to this, closing my eyes lets me rest from the stimulation and experience actual darkness. Maybe seeing is not believing. Maybe we see nothing when there is too much to see. Rye also lets me know that it should be noted that in the digital world, the opposite is true, darkness on an upper layer makes a lower image recede while brightness on the upper layer highlights the lower.

This reflection on light can also be translated to time and the different ways in which we can experience, feel and comprehend the passing of moments in certain contexts or frames of mind.

Rye often works with video, however perhaps due to her background in architecture and sculpture, it manifests more as a tangible substance. This exhibition features two works, emphasizing video as a material in its physical implementation but also a material that brings awareness to our embodiment - again a sculptural trope. However, sculpture can greet us in its tangible form and satisfy us immediately, video, on the other hand, takes time. In the gallery setting it tests our patience, asking us to step out of our routine, and forces us to pay attention. If we stick with it, we are usually rewarded.

Rye is also known for using her personal (and family-related) footage in her art. At the beginning of her career, Rye's exhibition *Byte* featured her baby daughter. The video installation focused on the tender and intimate play between a mother and child, however its exhibition caused controversy leading to censorship. A later installation, *Carnal*, again reveals Rye's daughter fully engaged in devouring ice cream in the afternoon sun, seemingly unaware and in the moment. The 2 year old eventually looks up at the last minute (while the video has slowly been enlarging and engulfing the other walls) to acknowledge that she knew we were watching the whole time - perhaps a response to the original controversy. In *Are Closer Than*, this time we see snippets of video footage that this now teenage daughter has taken on her cell phone.

The composition spanning the entire back wall primarily depicts a section of bed that centres on a pillow, it is empty and still, save for the quick, gentle and almost inaudible fluttering of the pillow case caused by a fan just inside the frame. We are lulled into the quiet hypnotic (yet dull) image. We are suddenly interrupted by snippets of other footage that overlay on the right side of the image and stream along the east wall. Here scenery stretches into abstract form, light becomes geometric - manipulated moving shapes - quick stripes and circles. The snippets disappear as quickly.

We are back to the pillow, waiting, watching. The interrupting snippets become distracting but also mesmerizing. We hear life, shouts, gurgles, bangs, as one might the din of the school ground across the street while stuck inside.

There are two works in the exhibition, the other video, *Waiting*, is located in the very small 'tomb-like' space located downstairs shown on a moderately sized monitor. This area is a lot more intimate - perhaps sheltered, or claustrophobic.

We see only a bland institutional-like wall with a clock, it is 4:30 and from the light through the partially blinded window, we conclude it is afternoon. The only thing that moves is the second-hand, the angle of the camera sits us below, looking up. Perhaps from viewing the pillow upstairs, I assume the thought that I may be lying down.

The work here also hinges on an interruption, this time the camera is knocked by a body that enters the frame, close and cropped, I can only see the ceiling now. This is where we become astutely aware of the body, it is as if our very own head has been violently knocked and we are helpless. The camera (our eyes) very slowly fall back into position - back to the excruciating mundane movement of the second-hand. The clock has gone back two minutes and we are doomed to repeat the slow movement yet again.

This work speaks to time in a few different ways. The footage for both videos comes from a hospital where Rye visited her dying mother over a period of time. It encapsulates a time where there were overlaps in contexts, generations, waiting, thinking, searching and the "in between" - the liminal states of waiting and searching, of context and realization.