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'Revealed' Flips World Upside Down

By Jonathan Thrope, News Editor. Published Wednesday September 19, 2007

With a walk into the small blue tent recently installed on the Freshmen Quad, the world is turned upside down and perceptions are distorted and challenged.

For the first time in recent memory, the Mead Art Museum has brought in a public art installation. Stephan Koplowitz's "Revealed" is a walk-in camera obscura. "The camera forces you to see the world differently and confront how you take in information," said Koplowitz, who has previously displayed the installation at MASS MoCA in North Adams, Mass., and on the Lower Promenade in front of the World Financial Center in Battery Park City, New York City. "The lens of the camera, because of how it treats distance and focal points, naturally distorts the body in terms of when something is in focus and out of focus."

"Revealed" uses technology that dates back centuries. Light from the outside simply enters the tent through a concave lens. The image displayed on a screen inside is an upside down, distorted version of what humans see. It shows how human eyes take in the world prior to processing by the brain.

The camera obscura is focused on the courtyard in front of the Mead Art Museum. Numerous sites on campus were considered for the installation. "I thought it made sense to actually have it looking at the museum itself," said Koplowitz, "and I wanted it to be looking at the spire in some way."

Today, at 11:30 a.m., 12:30 p.m., and 1:30 p.m., there will be performances, featuring Amherst students and members of the community, which will be centered around the camera obscura. The Department of Theater and Dance and Koplowitz are working together to create the performances. "They're going to be making movements that specifically heighten the experience of looking at

the world upside down,” said Koplowitz of the performers.

Koplowitz will be taking pictures of the performances. In addition, the Amherst College football team and women’s rugby team will be photographed by Koplowitz through the camera obscura.

Curator of European Art Carol Solomon Kiefer was the driving force behind bringing the installation to the College. The main motivation was for it to complement the main exhibit within the Mead—“The Room with a View,” a survey of Abelardo Morell’s photography. Morell is best known for his use of the camera obscura, and his photographs on display at the Mead show how the device can be used to distort reality. “There are two separate exhibitions that have this related content—the camera obscura,” said Kiefer.

Though tomorrow is the only performance event for “Revealed,” the walk-in camera obscura will remain on the quad through Sept. 25.

“For me this has really been a learning experience,” said newly installed Director and Chief Curator of the Mead Elizabeth Barker. “We’ve had to think through a lot of logistical details we never anticipated ... Lots of interesting issues that are different than merely borrowing a picture and hanging it on a wall.”

To make sure passers-by know what “Revealed” is and how it works, Barker posted several posters outside of the tent which document the history of the camera obscura. “I was anxious that people might find it off-putting and wouldn’t dare go inside or not realize that it was art work,” said Barker.

“Revealed” is one of a number of public art projects Koplowitz has put together. As a choreographer, he has organized big cast performances in the windows of Grand Central Terminal and throughout Europe.

“I think it’s important for us as citizens to realize that art can be part of the daily discourse of life. It’s not just something that you have to go inside a museum or to a black box theater [to see]. It can actually have resonance as part of life,” said Koplowitz. “People

who come into this camera and look at that view, when this camera is gone, I'm hopeful that when they walk by here, and they use their own eyes to look at it, they'll remember, I'm seeing this with new eyes."

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