

CRISTIN TIERNEY

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Mary Lucier: *Leaving Earth*

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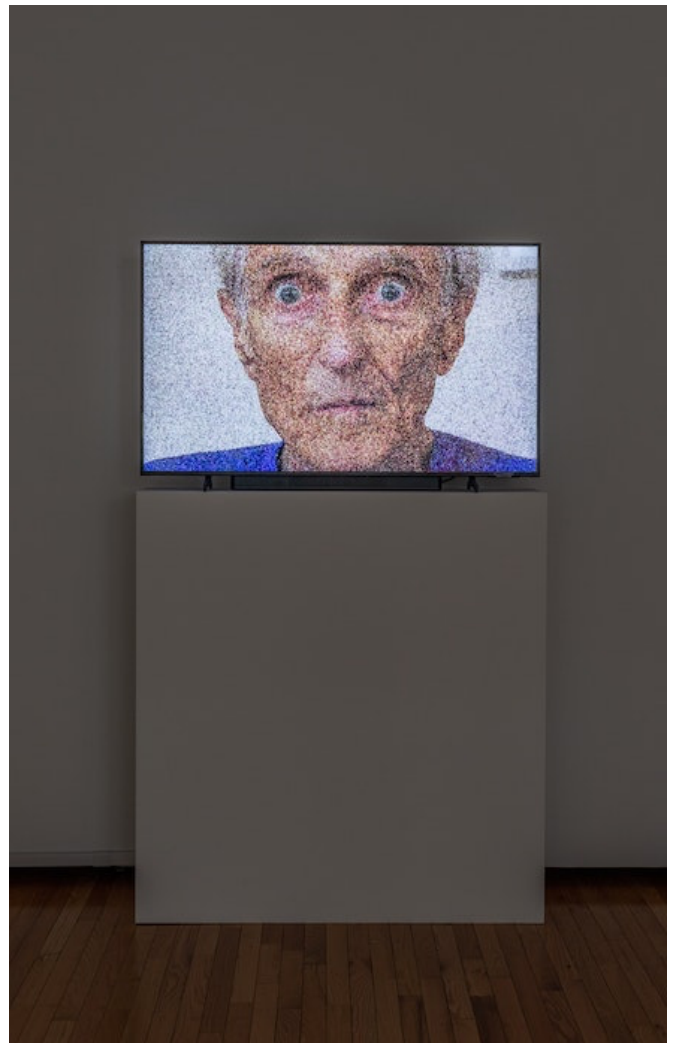
Installation view: *Mary Lucier: Leaving Earth*, Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York. Photo: Adam Reich.

Leaving Earth, Mary Lucier's immersive video installation at Cristin Tierney, tests the limits of attention with its Whitmanesque expanse. Nine screens, set on individual poles around the room, like a grove of monitors, feature unsynchronized video loops, some with sounds. A chain saw, the theme from the 1955 film *Picnic*, and saxophone compositions by her longtime collaborator Earl Howard all add to the din— Lucier harks back to her early work with Fluxus artists and the influence of John Cage. Footage of nesting swallows runs

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alongside that of fires at Ground Zero and decaying houses. From the highest screen, Lucier herself casts an inscrutable eye on the proceedings, like one of Peter Campus's enlarged projections of heads, but here set within a shifting collage of friends and artistic collaborators, a family album or home movie. Lucier also confronts death: the person "leaving" is her husband, the painter and critic Robert Berling, who died in 2015, and while the images center less on Berling than on their shared world, Lucier maintains a focus on him with threads of text from the journal he kept in his last months. These words scroll by on different screens, deliberately paced for emphasis, conveying the rhythm of speech, suggesting haiku and seeming to reflect on the installation itself: "my mind / now that of a child / for whom / time does not yet exist."

Lucier casts an unsentimental eye on the seductions of video: on entering the gallery, visitors encounter a sculptural assemblage featuring a scrap of steel with holes that suggest a face, transforming a burnt-out vidicon tube into a death's head. Harking back to Lucier's early work in welded metal, it also alludes to her "burns," videos from the 1970s filmed directly into the sun that left indelible scars on her camera's "eye." In a 1991 essay, "Light and Death," Lucier reflected on light's destructive capacity, linking it to her video work made in Monet's gardens, Ohio to Giverny: *Memory of Light* (1983), and in particular to Monet's own struggle with deteriorating vision. Lucier has consistently addressed the darkness inherent in our pursuit of natural beauty. Committed to technology and conceptual issues, she's also maintained the dialogue with painting, extending it in videos related to Berling's work from direct perception. In *Summer, or Grief* (1998), she employed an approach similar to *Leaving Earth*, combining words of a poem by Allen Grossman with close-up images of Berling painting outdoors in the landscape of their Sullivan County property.



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Here, in a screen on the floor, set like a threshold in front of the installation, an unsettling image of Berling, submerged like a body in Dante's River Styx, emerges among images shot underwater at their pond (including one of the videographers standing on the dock

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above). The conflation of screen and reflective surface suggests a passage between realms, with text from Berlind’s journal commenting on his difficulty in locating the water’s surface—“an unknowable membrane into the unknown.” Lucier makes inventive use of the architecture of the gallery to extend the dialectic of seeing and being seen. As her own face looms on the highest screen, in front of windows overlooking the Bowery, the implied object of her gaze is a screen behind us, depicting Berlind’s studio, veiled in otherworldly light with exaggerated contrast and movement. The camera focuses in on a painting of a tree next to a window, abstracting the branches until tree and landscape both dissolve into a digitized version of paint, suggesting an extension into video of the trompe-l’oeil tradition of John F. Peto and William Harnett.



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For all its technical sophistication, however, video still seems better at transubstantiating paint into light than at rendering its tactile materiality: there follows an uncanny image of Berlind, seemingly pixelated but actually composed of multi-colored “snow,”—footage Lucier collected from an old-fashioned TV—a simultaneously high tech yet retro version of Seurat that emphasizes Berlind’s removal from the everyday world and generates a poignant exchange of gazes across the gallery. Against this effort to bridge the divide between painting and video, life and death, a scroll of Berlind’s text brings in his own comment on leaving, through his involvement with Jewish mysticism, alluding to the

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body's attraction to *Adamah*, or earth, in Hebrew, as "spirit and body contemplate separation."

Another text encapsulates the installation: "a succession of / discontinuous moments / occur, then disappear." As Lucier endeavors to recapture Berlind's state of mind, we can't help but make connections among the fields of shifting images, envisioning webs of interaction that challenge mortal boundaries: veils of curtains billowing in a window breeze, a collapsing barn framed by Lucier's hand on the hood of a car, rushing water, flowers, the death throes of a fawn. With screens mounted like flowers, we might view *Leaving Earth*, like Giverny, as an artist's garden, serving, in Lucier's words, "to familiarize us with the cycles of birth, death and regeneration and to nourish some sense of power and control over our own ephemerality."