

PERFECT. “IMMERSED IN A LIMITLESS WORLD”

Mary Lucier, *Leaving Earth* (2023)
Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York, NY
January 19 - March 2, 2024

Mary Lucier
Catskill Art Space, Livingston Manor, NY
June 29 - August 24, 2024

Leaving Earth is a new multi-channel video installation by artist Mary Lucier (American, b. 1944). The artwork is the culmination of nearly nine years. Lucier began making video recordings for it shortly after her husband Robert Berling (American, 1938-2015) was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Importantly, *Leaving Earth* is not an elegiac memorial—it is a layered meditation on death as it is experienced by the dying and by those closest to them. Lucier weaves together an assemblage of the spaces they inhabited, his absence and her memories of him. More than a medium that records the past, Lucier uses video to unfold the life she and Berling lived together, before, during and after his death.

The work gets its title from a journal Berling kept after his diagnosis. Its diaristic entries are incorporated as white text on black backgrounds amidst the video footage recorded by Lucier. Berling was a painter, teacher, and astute critic. His subjects often return to the night, water, and trees observed from unusual perspectives which also appear as common themes in the videos of *Leaving Earth*. The carefully framed, largely static shots of the videos linger on their subjects as Lucier experienced the surroundings around their home in upstate New York and in New York City without him: the breeze passing through an open window, repairing a country house, an outdoor woodfire, close-ups of rust patterns, driving into New York City at night. But the incorporation of text and images together elides a single person's perspective and both artists remain present throughout.

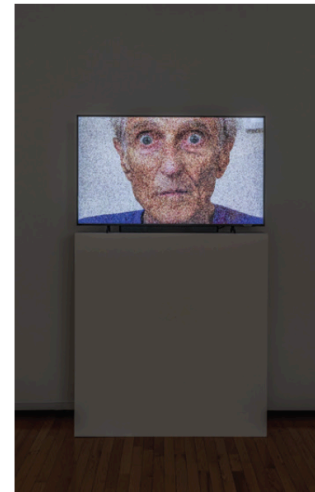
Lucier began working with video in the 1970s and has emphasized the sculptural-like qualities of the medium since then. More than an immaterial image on a screen, video is resolutely object-like. The screen monitor has weight and presence, and its placement, orientation and scale create particular viewing

dynamics that shape the work as a whole. The position of the video screens in *Leaving Earth* encourages the viewer's movement throughout the space. The first monitor is the “introduction” to the work, it features images of Berling, his studio and paintings. This video monitor is mounted at the front wall of the gallery. Six more videos on freestanding screens are then arranged at different heights in the center of the gallery space, another screen is placed horizontally on the floor, while the last is mounted on a wall around a corner of the gallery. The gallery has large windows facing out onto the Bowery and these windows frame the freestanding screens, creating an additional image contrast between the city buildings outside the window and the video images on the screens. Each video loops on a monitor that has been individually edited with its own theme, such as “Garden and Junkyard,” “Water,” or “The City.” Close-ups verge on total abstraction: these take on a hyper-focused quality that defamiliarizes the subject the longer one looks. Other video images are more classically picturesque, for example a long still shot of trees wrapped in a dense gray fog. Sound ebbs and flows along with the images, and like them, becomes associative. A video showing a large tree being cut into logs in rural upstate New York fills the room with the whine of a chainsaw, and this same sound continues to permeate when one of Berling's drawings of dismembered trees takes over the screen.

The arrangement of the screens directs the viewer to focus either on a single screen or the mosaic-like viewing of multiple screens all at once. Significantly, *Leaving Earth* has no internal order to the images and text, nor is there narrative synchronization between the screens in the installation. Instead, in a radical departure from Lucier's previous multichannel video installations of carefully synchronized editing like *Ohio at Giverny*, 2 channels on 7 monitors (1983) or *The Plains of Sweet Regret*, 5 channels on



ALL IMAGES Mary Lucier, Installation view of *Leaving Earth* at the Cristin Tierney Gallery, 2024. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Adam Reich.



4 projectors and 2 monitors (2004), each video in *Leaving Earth* has its own looped duration. This multiplicity and simultaneity does not result in a cacophony of images but allows for the creation of spontaneous relational meanings and juxtapositions. According to Lucier, the loose framework with images drifting in and out resembles the mind of Berling as he was dying. In this way the installation is inexhaustible, the viewer “immersed in a limitless world,” as one excerpt from Berling's diary reads. Everyday surroundings become the subjects of renewed investigation as if seen for the first, or final, time. Terminal illness as such brings death and life closer together, such that their boundaries seem to blur beyond recognition. *Leaving Earth*, too, invites us to consider the spaces between, and around us as they interpenetrated, overlaid or merged by memory as well as the presences and absences, associations or contradictions produced by the video images.

Between Cristin Tierney Gallery and its second installation at the Catskill Art Space, the exhibition spaces as well as the video imagery of *Leaving Earth* join the living and working environments of Lucier and Berling. Although the arrangement of monitors at CAS was largely the same, the video cycle was

nonetheless entirely different. Nature seemed more prominent in images of lush green forests and fields as well as in the sparkling movement of light over surfaces of water. A photograph of Berling on the floor monitor stared up from the watery depth, like the river Styx.

While I spent time in the exhibition, one of the longest cycles included a video screen with a recording of Lucier's face opposite a screen featuring Berling's—their silent gazes nearly meeting. The video image reaches across time and even death itself to momentarily reunite them. In contrast, the screen on the floor featured a close-up of water circling a bathtub drain, a visual pun on death. This kind of levity sporadically emerges to return the viewer from the metaphysical to the earthly realm. *Leaving Earth* is both a vulnerable work that navigates illness and loss and it is equally a testament to Lucier's fearlessness as an artist and her hope in life.

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