CHICAGO READER 2005 Fred Camper

Rethinking Thought

Since she moved here in 1994 for graduate school at the University of Illinois, **Helen Mirra** has become one of the city's best-known artists, with recent exhibits in New York and Germany and upcoming shows in Tokyo and Paris. But now, as happens all too often when a Chicago artist achieves recognition, she's moving away, first for a year's residency in Berlin and then to teach art at Harvard.

Mirra's art physicalizes things that aren't physical in the usual sense. Her dad made educational films and videos, and he'd check out films from the public library and screen them at home. Handling 16-millimeter film and running the family's projector herself as a child, Mirra was struck by the difference between the physical strip, with its individual still images, and the projected moving illusion. She loved Mr. Magoo, in part because of his accidents of vision. "He's not dumb, but he misconstrues things, so he thinks he's in a movie theater while he's on an airplane," she says. "It seems at least partly willful misunderstanding."

In Mirra's current exhibit at Donald Young the walls are bare except for 21 thin brown bands of cotton stretching around the room. Each is 16 millimeters high and has words and numbers typed on it—names or concepts ("equivocal and double future, 158") in what appears to be a book index. As her statement explains, she did index William James's *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. She considers each band, each representing a different letter of the alphabet, to be a separate piece, and they have titles like *Regret, 176* and *Sparrow's Death, 218*. Mirra's phrases lack the flow and logic of prose—they're like stills from a film. The bands also recall typewriter ribbons, and Mirra types the text on an old manual machine. She hangs the strips at slightly different heights and paints the cloth in various browns to give them tactility.

Helen Mirra
WHERE Donald Young, 933 W. Washington
WHEN Through July 16
INFO 312-455-0100

Long fascinated with "the idea of transposing one kind of structure into another," Mirra once used the same type of banding for typed descriptions of shots in Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, and she made and projected a 360-foot-long film that "mapped a sliver of the world" by alternating blue sections for sky and green for land in the proportions found along the 52nd parallel. For the installation *Sky-Wreck*, shown at the Renaissance Society in 2001, she imagined a portion of the sky as a solid surface, represented by 110 stitched-together triangles of blue cloth woven for her by a collective in India. She calculated the number of triangles needed by thinking of the sky as a geodesic dome, so the installation would be like "a piece of the sky that's fallen out, or a patch for a hole in the sky."



FRED CAMPER (ARTWORK), PAUL L. MERIDETH (PORTRAIT)

Helen Mirra, her *Murder, 178* (detail)

Also on view at Donald Young is an index she made on a single sheet of paper of W.G. Sebald's novel *The Rings of Saturn*. "Indexing is a way for me to think through a book from an active place as opposed to a conclusionary place." The indexes aren't intended to be analyses but acts of "friendship," she says. "I have a deep belief in nonoriginality. Both James and Sebald are always pulling from other sources."

Mirra's belief in nonoriginality stems from a sense of interdependence with other people and the natural world. At a Unitarian summer camp she encountered "progressive ideas about equity and respect and cooperation," and the Montessori school she attended encouraged students to observe cause and effect. By making pretzels, the kids learned "that snacks don't come out of thin air." By high school she was reading the Black Mountain poets, which led her to John Cage, who taught at Black Mountain College. Studying Cage led her to share his interest in mushrooms: "They're connected to each other through huge networks," she says, "and they absorb everything." A bicyclist and vegetarian, she says she believes in "doing as little harm as possible to the planet. But like everyone, I'm imperfect." —**Fred Camper**