

CATCHING OUR BREATH

Max Underwood

"To be an artist is not a matter of making paintings or objects at all.

What we are really dealing with is our state of consciousness and the shape of our perception."

—Robert Irwin, "The State of the Real, Part 1"

On a cold winter's day you can see your breath and witness the unseen phenomenon of the essential oxygen exchange between your body and the atmosphere. Similarly you can watch yourself become enveloped by advancing fog, floating across the Puget Sound, and observe the sea breathe. Such too is the case with Atherton|Keener's work, situated within the fertile landscape between architecture and art. Each building and installation creates a living, breathing atmospheric space infused with layers of deep thought and subtly changing meteorological, oceanographic and geological phenomena. Air, fire, water and earth – the four primordial elements become lenses for perceiving and understanding ourselves and the larger world around us. Upon entering any of Jay Atherton + Cy Keener's works, you are filled with a sense of wonder—suspended between reason and sentience—which stir you to reflect upon the multitude of overlooked mental and physical exchanges that occur between your body and Nature each day. Jay and Cy's finely tuned buildings and installations become your prompts to explore the spaces between your interior being and your outer facade; between our society and the natural world.

Focusing upon air and breath, *Buoyancy* presents the vital seen and unseen exchanges occurring in Seattle between individuals, communities and this breath-taking landscape. As you enter the Suyama Space galley, with its richly layered history as a former livery stable and automotive garage, you are immediately filled with the Japanese sense of shibumi—an elegant simplicity and understated beauty. Slowly walking over the rough wood floor, enclosed by smooth white walls, fortified by heavy timber trusses, and softly lit from the skylight above—you are overcome by a quiet sense of calm and serenity. At first glance Atherton|Keener's installation seems too simple—one free floating sheet of shiny mylar, billowing halfway to the floor, and counter balanced, in equilibrium by 60 basalt rocks, all of which are suspended by jute twine from the trusses above, and allowed to move freely. A sense of stillness, tranquility and silence pervade the space—like many of the site-conditioned and perceptual emergent Phenomenal and Minimalist installations of the 1960's and 1970's. But exhale, pause, and take a moment to increase your attentiveness.

This is a slow atmospheric work, which requires immersion, patience and an extended duration of time for its subtleties and hidden secrets to emerge. It is in this state of idleness that its very essence begins. Bit-by-bit, the stasis subsides, and piece begins to breathe and come to life. As the temperature of the gallery changes the piece becomes more fluid and responsive to diurnal changes—like a barometer. Invisible warm and cold air currents gently caress the shiny mylar surface, reflections of light appear and disappear, and a displaced basalt rock begins to register the slightest vertical movement by slowly turning at its own frequency. *Buoyancy* is a kinetic work embodying the adaptive complexity of life. Suddenly, like a sleeper wave hitting Alki beach, a mail carrier will rush through the gallery, leaving unexpected turbulent waves rippling across the mylar surface and lines of pirouetting rocks in their wake. Extrospective memories of past experiences with Seattle's unpredictable meteorological, oceanographic and geological phenomena come flooding back—moonlight, fog, wind, clouds, snow, rivers, tides, tectonic plates, the Cascades, boats, blimps, balloons and Boeing planes re-enter your thoughts and imagination.

Philosophical inquiry and refined building are not solitary pursuits, but require you to inhale the world around you. Like the recent symbiotic work of Olafur Eliasson and Junya Ishigami, Jay and Cy's buildings and installations inspire you to seek out others, engage in dialogue, and begin to discover ways to breathe together. As Seattle's human and natural systems continue to emerge, align and seek equilibrium, *Buoyancy's* 60 interdependent pieces of basalt are constantly seeking momentary stasis, and reminding you of your responsibility to share, support and respond with new collective insight into our ever-changing lives and unstable world.

When air condenses in Seattle it becomes visible as clouds, rain, mist and fog. The Greek philosopher Anaximenes asserted that when air laden with water vapor cooled, it condensed to form the earth, and ultimately stones. Such was the case with Atherton|Keener's *Buoyancy* installation, where Seattle's essential phenomena, matter, people and heritage condensed for a few short weeks, allowing each of us to pause, witness this rarefied air, connect with ourselves, our community, and catch our breath.

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