

surface

In Conversation: James Gaddy and Michael Jones McKean

A short interview with James Gaddy of Surface Magazine discussing *The Rainbow: certain principles of light and shapes between forms* June 4, 2012

James Gaddy: Can you elaborate a little bit on how you became interested in the rainbow phenomena and when / how you decided to incorporate it into your practice?

Michael Jones McKean: The project's genesis has its roots in objects and time. In a poetic way, but also in some sense a phenomenological way — through all of time there has been only one rainbow. Coded within the image there is a consistency, an extreme fidelity in the essential form of a rainbow. The image doesn't evolve or degrade in the same way a piece of fruit does, or an iPod does, or even more stoically the way a mountain does — it is a constant. When we see a rainbow we are communing with our ancestors — seeing exactly the same shape they saw just as we astral project into the future witnessing the same event our children's children will see. It races out to the edges of time. But this image is also fully absorbed in the here-and-now and in all its fleeting fragility, at the moment we witness a rainbow it reminds us that we are also here, and right now. As someone that thinks a lot about objects and time, the rainbow became an interesting starting point to build a series of metaphors about objects, time and people....

JG: What was the most difficult or surprising aspect you discovered in the process of trying to create a rainbow 'on demand' as it were?

MJM: I do not really understand the project as 'on demand.' I'm interested in the extreme contingency the project embraces. But if I were to push it a bit, in some sense the 'on demand' quality you're interpreting was the easiest part. When we see a rainbow we are witnessing the result of a fixed set of constants, a set of principles that behave in very predictable ways: basic geometry and sight lines, the orbit of the earth in the relation to the sun, the tilt and spin of the planet on its axis and the miniature prism-water droplets all collaborating to produce an elegant optical effect — a rainbow. But even as these parts can be relied on and are known — the result still feels like magic.

What made the project difficult had to do with scale and more specifically the insistence of harvesting and reclaiming rainwater in a perpetual loop. From the beginning, it was essential to consider water as a rare commodity within the project — from this, a set of difficult problems cascaded down in which to solve — problems that required a very specialized group of people and an organization willing to step into the unknown.

JG: How much concern do you have about the weather itself and whether it will conspire against you during the project? Are there specific elements that are outside your control, which keep you up at night?

MJM: It is a good question. With a project like this, one with so many working parts and possible contingencies I might never sleep, panicked that a cloud might pass in front of the sun at an inopportune moment. But early on I realized that it was essential to fully embrace fragility and the delicate nature of the project not only as important conceptual pillars — but as something that gave the project a sweetness — a kind of mortality. The project could never be about overcoming nature or battling nature, it's about embracing things that are already there — about creating a bizarre internal logic and following it through logically.

JG: Do you think that much of the power of the rainbow comes from its surprise — like a favorite song unexpectedly on the radio? And if so, do you think that re-creating this effect will reduce that power somewhat?

MJM: To answer the question it's critical to understand that I'm making an artwork. In some ways your question is like asking, "might making a film about love diminish the power of love?" I just don't see it that way. I'm making a project that flirts with the charged space between something that is in of itself actual and real, but also a representation — a fiction. And as with any fiction, the project exudes a vital 'mere-ness' when measured next to the magnitude of life...

In the way this project has been conceived, it could never complete with the majesty of a rainbow hovering in the sky after a shower arcing 30 miles over terrain, linking shore to town. Buried within the DNA of the project I've tried to maintain a decency and resiliency to the image. Over the course of the entire project, the rainbow appears only fleetingly — a few minutes here and there. To some degree, the rainbow is never there, we wait for it in all its contingency and fragility, leaning on the whims of nature with sun and rainwater as fixed tenets within the project. Even as we've gone to extreme measures to produce a rainbow the project exists for most people more as a figment in the mind, a ghost, in many ways as a real one does...