

Lisi Raskin
Transmission Gallery, Glasgow, Scotland.
November/December '05

The life of a submariner is very much a hidden one; manifestations of their curious craft are more like UFO sightings than the pomp and ceremony of cruiser christenings and liner launchings. As a result the other problem is of visualising what happens under water in these bloated atomic cigars. We usually only get to see the top half, looking a bit like an oily fish fillet, as it slides into port. Rarely do we get the movie image of the inquisitive periscope turning this way and that. In the Beatle's Yellow Submarine the Mersey mariners have a winking eyeball residing in the aperture of the periscopes body; the sub as a mutant psychedelic animal. In her work for Transmission Gallery Lisi Raskin doesn't go for such bug eyed comic effects, instead the gallery-goer is immediately called upon to negotiate their way around the various sculptural obstacles in this show, their bewildered heads bobbing and revolving very much like the submarines eyeglass appendage.

The first of these intrusions or incursions into the space is an erupting floor. Fabricated in sheets of board splattered with plaster and painted grey this suggests a great many briny metaphors. This contusion resides somewhere between a Caspar David Friedrich iceberg and the disintegrating wooden craft that Jaws seems to appreciate as a giant ocean going toothpick. Raskin deploys this idea of an underwater threat appearing in a violent and destructive way whilst the tension of the inherent ludicrousness of doing it in a gallery space is clear in the choice of materials.

Multiple objects are set on a collision course at the rear of the space also. A tree house/stalkers hide/watchtower blur into an uneasy nuclear shanty town; construction materials and methods seemingly from the world of necessity rather than design. When thinking of all things Trident (the nuclear missiles used by the UK's navy) one can't help but make an association between Raskin's jumbled panicky assemblages and the women's peace camp at Greenham common. Here the protesters encampment became a sea of tents that ossified into structures of more permanence as their arguments finally became firmly lodged in a political consciousness of Jurassic slowness.

Scotland's site of mass protest is the controversial Faslane naval base north of Glasgow. Raskin has recorded video works in nearby Cove Park (which runs the residency programme that supported the research for this exhibition). Accordingly the video footage residing in the tower includes a series of actions including the parading of a submarine head appendage (very much in the anthropomorphic periscope tradition) along with some vocal approximations of submarine sounds as if trying to name and record them at once. 'Cow' the artist intones as a highland cow hoves into view as if trying to remember what it is. The long tradition of protest art gets made fun of here, Raskin's plops and whistles fitting rather well with the sights and sounds of a march. One begins to feel a little less despairing about the prospects for dissent in this country.

In the basement of the gallery the bloated belly of the sea monster droops from the ceiling in a great swathe of black plastic, a model of a half submarine in choppy silver water on a sweeping plinth looking like a cruise ships funnel sits nearby. The tension between a gallery, or as it sometimes appears, esoteric nautical museum is tangible here.

Raskin uses this distance between the dual metaphors of her constructions to reinforce her hop-scotch jumps from idea to idea. Condoning and condemning is bound up in the sense of fun and emboldening adaptations that reside in these kinds of structures. An anti nuclear protest on Edinburgh's Royal Mile recently used what the press dubbed a 'mock submarine' to block the road. Organised by splendidly named Trident Ploughshares group everybody's favourite Scottish Socialist MP, Rosie Kane, was on hand for a sound-bite or three. "Rosie Kane is not at FMQs (first ministers questions) because she discovered WMDs" her placard read. A fair point most would agree and delivered from a 'hastily assembled 25ft craft' (you can always rely on the BBC for these kinds of details!).

Ideas about travel, protest and of shelter remain essential. There is a certain nostalgia for a time in the eighties when women mobilized to walk to Greenham Common. The government and the camps' commander believed they would get fed up and go away. That was 1982; the camp was finally dismantled in 2000. Raskin's work is filled with the joyous indignation and the eccentricity of this pioneering spirit. In 1982 Maggie Thatcher was in power with her proto-royal suit and immobile fright wig (the embodiment of cold war paranoia); in 2005 we have an artist with a submarine strapped to her head responding intuitively and chaotically to something that never ceases to horrify visitors; a nuclear base in the middle of the highlands of Scotland. In Transmission gallery the great bucolic British crackpot assemblage is explored in a series of structures by turns repellent and bewildering. Things are just as they should be in other words.