

How Does She Breathe? By Holly Willis

To enter the space of a video installation by Natasa Prosenec is to reawaken the sentient self, the body and perception as it meets the world prior to all thought and theory. While this experience may not be unique to Prosenec's work, her insistence on finding the ground of connection that unites people with the organic world almost is. Indeed, Prosenec is a bit of an anomaly in the international contemporary video art scene. Whereas the focus of much recent work tends to be conceptual and highly aware of its specificity and place of enunciation, or – increasingly – narrative in nature, Prosenec pursues transcendent themes that extend well beyond the moment of her artwork's existence. "I'm trying to find a universal source, whether through the body or nature," she has said, and it is here, in the variable spaces between the physical body and the world that her work resides.

Prosenec's work often addresses the body, and as such, helps us regain a fundamental connection to what philosopher Edmund Husserl calls the "Lebenswelt," or life-world. He used the term to refer to the world as we experience it before we subject it to analysis. While there is a tendency to divide mind and body, especially in an increasingly technologized world, and as such, for many of us to feel progressively more alienated from our physical selves, Prosenec's installations often make us profoundly aware of the boundaries of the body while also hinting at its potential limitlessness.

With *The Pillar* (1997), for example, Prosenec studies the body's exterior – the texture of skin, the ripple of muscles, the angular edges of a hip or elbow – but complicates the singularity of physical embodiment by combining more than one body. Indeed, what we see are images of intertwined bodies as they merge and blend to become one layered, amorphous human form. With the piece, Prosenec suggests the mutability of the body's boundaries, inviting us to understand a sense of self that expands beyond the confines of somatic limitation. Further, Prosenec projects this body onto a pillar, in effect transforming the solidity of three-dimensional space into one of sensuous movement. The space of the artwork becomes a fantasy projection extending from our own sense of embodiment while suggesting a kind of interconnectedness that Prosenec clearly admires. Many of Prosenec's pieces achieve a similarly fascinating interplay.

With other projects, Prosenec sometimes disrupts our often naïve ideas about the body, helping us see and experience it anew. In *The Well* (2001), for example, viewers step up to a cylinder of bricks resembling the exterior of a wishing well. Peering down inside, we see the palpating pink muscle of a human heart, huge and glistening below. While images of the body's interior are relatively familiar thanks to the penetrating gaze of technology, Prosenec interrupts that familiarity, making the image a spectacle in terms of its size and placement. She also plays with the tropes of love and the heart, offering the sentimental alongside the very somatic.

Similarly, *Sphere* (2001) places the human form in a fantastical setting – entering a totally dark gallery space, we come upon what looks like a large, water-filled globe suspended in mid-air; inside, a naked woman swims about. Ethereal and strangely mesmerizing, the piece is less a fish bowl containing the figure and her aqueous habitat and more like a planetary orb occupied by a water nymph, who seems slightly too large for her world. In some ways the piece references the well-known Victorian-era painting of Ophelia by John Everett Millais, in which a lovely maiden lies dead in a pool of water. Criticized by feminists for its erotization of a dead woman, the painting marks a sense of passivity that *Sphere* refuses; Prosenec's piece instead celebrates a vibrant female body, one less easily pinned down.

With its murky greens and deep blues, and the fluidity of the body seemingly hovering in space, *Sphere* is both aesthetically stunning and conceptually mesmerizing. More than that, though, the piece once again defamiliarizes the body, helping us see – and feel – it anew. Indeed, questions such as, "How does she breathe?" begin to affect our own breathing, while the swimmer's languid, fluid motion invoke the pleasures of swimming.

While these pieces foreground the body, Prosenč also deftly conjures images of larger human themes and questions – the struggle of existence, our connection with the universe, quests for spiritual meaning and the relationship between male and female are a few of her primary topics. Many of these appeared in Prosenč's *Gladiators*, her four-part installation presented in the Slovene Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1999. Here, Prosenč directly addressed the four elements – earth, air, water and fire – alongside essential and transcendent human pursuits. The images created around the elements are as compelling as those of Prosenč's bodies. Huge walls of spiraling fire, or spinning circles of sand that pulsate with hypnotic power (as in *Vortex*, 1999), or giant mountains of granite-like rocks across which a naked man climbs (*Reason*, 1996): these are just a few of the most memorable in Prosenč's elemental image repertoire. "Art should be a voyage to something unknown," she has said, and her work often speeds directly toward the center of life's biggest mysteries.

Another recurring image in Prosenč's work is the human face. Philosopher Emanuel Levinas writes eloquently about the face-to-face encounter, noting that in it we experience the vulnerability of the other, and must take some responsibility for that exposure. "There is first the very uprightness of the face," writes Levinas, "its upright exposure, without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with a decent nudity.... The face is meaning all by itself...it leads you beyond." By incorporating faces into her often transcendent themes, Prosenč invites us to see more than eyes, noses and mouths; we experience human vulnerability and morality, and we reckon with our responsibility to the other.

Many of Prosenč's visual tropes and themes culminate in her newest work, *Crossing*, the artist's largest and most complex installation to date. Set within the majestic architecture of the Cistercian Church in Kostanjevica na Krki, which not only commands a sense of awe in response to its grandeur and magnitude, but also an awareness of the spiritual, the piece constitutes a significant merging of form and content. Here Prosenč has had to grapple with how to collaborate with the church's own architectural details, as well as the sheer size of the space. Paying careful attention to lay-out and scale, Prosenč succeeds. The body, the elements, the intricacies of human face and their imbrication within the spiritual take shape in the form of a deconstructed cross, a form that may also connote a wing or a fan spread throughout the space.

Experienced as a sequence of video projections on carefully placed screens, *Crossing* moves from concrete to abstract, from body to spirit, from female to male. And once again, the movement of the breath is central. Breath becomes a constant, moving the bodies and faces through fire and water in a process of transition and cleansing. As with breathing, nothing remains fixed or static; everything is in flux, moving and shifting, expanding and contracting. And more so than perhaps any of her earlier works, the piece invites us to move through it, experiencing the passage and dissolution of images as fully as the piece itself embodies a similar passage and transformation.

"The main theme for me is one of transition," Prosenč has said of the piece. "I am trying to understand what is happening in this spot in time, when all the questions have come undone. After everything solid was deconstructed in the last century, the challenge now is to accept the immense complexity of answers that are in constant flux." And what better place, mused the artist, to ponder the themes of origins, or source, or even of "god," than in a church?