

Niamh O'Malley

(County Mayo, Ireland, 1975)

The central interest in Niamh O'Malley's research is the status of the image, its existence that is simultaneously a fact external to the viewer and a fact constructed by the viewer in the very act of looking. This subject has a distant ancestry in positivist studies of optics in the nineteenth century and its roots thus can be found in the history of painting, both as a development of pictorial techniques in relation to photography and color theory, and as illusive language, devoted since antiquity to mimesis and to the deception of *trompe l'oeil*. Image and eye conspire to create the deception that they feed off, and both, Niamh O'Malley seems to say, fail to establish any possible relationship with reality and its truth. Regarding her work, Niamh Dunphy, writing in *Paper Visual Art Journal*, has cited a well-known passage by Virginia Woolf from *Street Haunting, A London Adventure*: "The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream; resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks."

An eye that floats over things is what the artist shows us in her video projections, as well as in her installations where filters and sheets of glass are superimposed on pictorial images. All her work is a composing of layers that the artist allows to run over one another, to reveal or hide images and convey the fallibility of the eye.

The title of *Quarry*, a video projection from 2011, seems to contradict Virginia Woolf's assumption. It is made up of shots of a marble quarry where sometimes the glance seems able to suddenly grasp the volumetric concreteness of the rock where it seems possible to think of our eyes like miners who probe the depths of the stone. It seems it is possible to investigate the excavating of a classical sculptor who shapes bodies and space and voids, "extracting" the image of reality and life from a square block. But in *Quarry* O'Malley also strips bare the illusive mechanism through the passage of the filters before the lens. Like so many curtains or "veils of the Maya," they show us how what seemed like a realistic image was nothing but an image that had been altered. The sensation is always that of looking at the wall of rock, but then a filter is removed and we discover that something was obfuscating, and without it we would not have been aware of our vision.

In this video, as in earlier ones, O'Malley projects not onto a white screen that heightens the brilliance of the images, but onto a screen of black cotton that swallows and blunts light and volumes. It is as if the screen that separates us from reality is not only the screen of vision, not only the screen of reproduction, but also the screen of the surface itself, of the place where we delude ourselves that the reality of the image rests. (EV)