

Watermarks
Coble/Riley Projects, 2012.
HD Video, 22 minutes



Since 2009, Mary Coble (USA/DK) and Blithe Riley (USA) have been collaborating on performance-based videos that explore the tensions between site-specificity, gesture, narrative, and endurance. In February 2012, Coble/Riley Projects was invited to participate in a month-long Iaspis Residency in Umeå, Sweden. This is an excerpt from a conversation between Mary and Blithe where they discuss their newest work “Watermarks” that was made on the frozen sea during that time.

Mary: I first visited Umeå in 2009 where I was introduced to a climate that was unique to me. Below freezing temperatures, massive snowstorms and very short days led to an experience of physicality that put me in a state of acute sensorial awareness. The consciousness of how I was affected by this extreme climate extended to my perception (or misperception) of how the landscape was also transformed by these extremes. These sensations made a strong impact on me again as we worked on *Watermarks* in 2012.

Blithe: The process of making *Watermarks* was strenuous and challenging, but also very special. I too was aware of the way my perception shifted in the environment, especially by working on the ice for long periods. We became hyper-aware of details such as changes in light and color, the wind, temperature, and degrees of snowfall. In addition to collaborating together, we were also collaborating with nature.

Mary: This state of being hyper-aware came at first of necessity. On many days, the ice was covered in snow and it resembled a field that could be easily travelled, while other days melting areas become more prominent and menacing. As we spent more time on the ice I think our awareness became less about our apprehension but more focused around our exploration and awe. Perhaps we sought to reveal the details and our experiences through the video?

Blithe: Definitely. One way we show detail is by playing with different levels of opaqueness and transparency in the piece. For me, the first level of transparency is evident within the simplicity of the action and the act of repetition. The basic action remains a constant, allowing the viewer the space to focus on nuances. There is a constant uncovering and revealing of different surfaces. We are making something visible that is hidden. At the same time, the water itself is a transparent material that appears solid with the reflection of light.

The opaqueness comes back to the figure, the unknown identity and motivation for the action this person enacts. Like you said, there is also the density of the snow and how it hides the surface underneath. This acts as a kind of canvas for us to make marks and draw on.

Mary: I could also frame your thoughts on transparency and opaqueness as part of our exploration of potential meanings, outcomes and motivations. There is a dialogue that takes place between what is or is not revealed, and by a lack of rationalization in the process.

Blithe: Yes, and that is a strategy we use in a lot of our work. We’ve talked about our common interest in exploring mental and physical spaces that reflect an “in-between” state. I think there is an exciting possibility of an action, place, or journey that is unknown or only partially defined. We leave it up to the viewer to fill in the gaps of “why” this action is taking place, or “where” the place that the action is being held in. For me those unknown aspects provoke an imaginary engagement.

Mary: In *Watermarks* we developed a series of gestures in reaction to the quickly changing conditions on the ice and the information we gathered from residents in the area. I see *Watermarks* as melding video, performance and land art. It is an edited version of a performance that was created specifically for video, but that was a part of a larger gesture that left a mark in the landscape, which also seemed relevant yet we were the only witnesses.

Blithe: That is something we have talked about as both a source of frustration and excitement. There are two layers to the work that we make—the component that exists in real-time and space that we are often the only audience for, and the piece we construct for video. I think this goes back to the essential nature of our collaboration in general, the conversation between the live and recorded experience.