

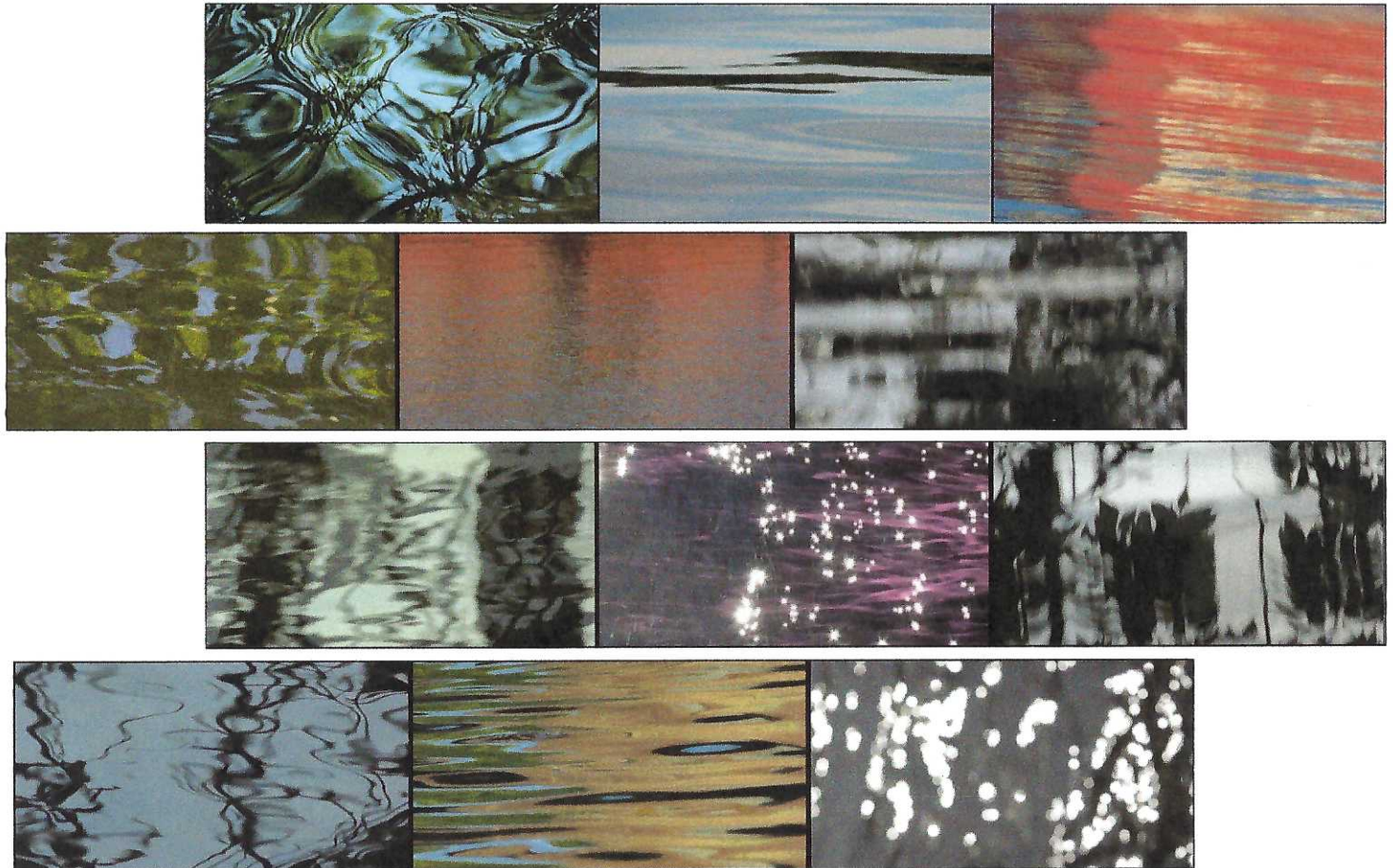
THE RIVERTOWNS

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Still images from “riverthatflowsbothways,” an audiovisual installation by artist Ellen Kozak and composer Scott Miller.

## Hudson River Museum’s exhibits enlarge dimensions of abstraction

By Kris DiLorenzo

YONKERS — The Hudson River Museum is presenting three exhibitions exploring abstraction this summer: “Force Field,” drawings of charcoal, ink, and graphite on paper, by Christine Hiebert; “Variations on a Theme,” 16 etchings by Donald Judd; and “riverthatflowsbothways,” an audiovisual installation by artist Ellen Kozak and her husband, composer Scott Miller.

The original inhabitants of the Hudson Valley, the Lenape people of the Delaware Nation, called the Hudson “the river that flows both ways.” That description is not an optical illusion. The Hudson flows upstream toward Albany and downstream toward New York Harbor, depending upon the tide.

Kozak’s studio, where she has worked since 1993, sits by the riverbank in New Baltimore, in Greene County, and her intimate connection with the chameleon river is evident. Her photos and videos use it as a lens through which she views its entire environment, portrayed as reflections, colors, and patterns.

The Kozak-Miller collaboration consists of images projected onto a wall-mounted triptych of 65-inch-square HDTV screens, flowing in loops at what Miller calls “a glacial pace,” accompanied by his original music, recorded by a string quintet of cello, viola, two violins, and bass. “Scott was very attentive to the rhythm and the slow dissolves I incorporated into the video,” Kozak said. “I

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# HRM exhibits

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think he was really faithful to the feeling of that pace.”

Miller described how the installation’s music evolved. “Ellen showed me the original still photos, and I was stunned. It was hard to believe at times that they were photographs. Some looked like drawings; some were abstract. Prior to any of this, I had some sketches of music I had sitting around waiting for an opportunity to use.” He sent parts to each musician, and to conductor Carl Bettendorf. They rehearsed for an hour in a Brooklyn recording studio, and finished recording in three hours.

On the installation’s center screen, luminous close-ups of water segue from placid to rippling to mysterious, creating a calm feeling in the room. The images and patterns on the flanking screens are all about movement, but Kozak has blurred and abstracted them so much that it takes imagination to see the shapes of overhanging dark green foliage reflected in the water. None of the images were manipulated.

One striking image is of reflected gold and red on the water — created by a long red barge carrying concrete. The sight is familiar, but there’s no barge in Kozak’s photo, just an impression, a reminder that the cargo on such barges can be crude oil shipped from North Dakota and Canada — a potential disaster for the river’s health.

Perhaps the most impressive visual was a mistake.

“I was using a point-and-shoot camera, and I accidentally took video,” Kozak explained, “then I did exactly what you’re not supposed to do: I pointed it directly at the sun.”

That happy accident produced its own cosmos: violet streaks across the screen, studded by bright white bursts of what could be twinkling stars. The effect resembles the sun shimmering on the surface of the river.

“The purple was actually the camera blowing up, the electronic chip self-destructing and creating its own artifact,” she elaborated. “I started buying cheap point-and-shoots on eBay, trying to recreate the accident.”

She now uses a DSLR camera that shoots stills and video. Between 1993 and 2007 she made paintings of the Hudson. As she focused more on photos and video, she immersed herself in the river, sometimes standing in the water while she worked.

Kozak’s relationship with the river is not merely artistic. “I first became aware of the critical importance of water when I saw Riverkeeper’s boat patrolling the river,” she explained. “I became aware that the tides were gradually rising.”

That environmental organization uses its 36-foot vessel to patrol the Hudson, on the lookout for pollution, and to conduct scientific studies. Kozak is now a board member of Riverkeeper.

Both Kozak and Miller, who live in Soho, have specialized educations. Kozak, 62, earned a master of science degree in visual studies, at the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies. Miller, 61, is a graduate of Oberlin Conservatory, and holds an MFA in composition from Princeton University and a master’s degree in music education from Teachers College, Columbia University.

Classically trained, Miller is artistic director of Tilted Head Ensemble, another fluid entity, whose changing musicians create and perform contemporary American music. He composes experimental music and jazz, collaborating with poets, dramatists, and



Christine Hiebert's ink and charcoal drawing *Untitled (rd.13.5)*

other visual artists. His work has been performed in Manhattan at venues including La MaMa, Symphony Space, The Knitting Factory, CBGB, P.S. 122, and the Lincoln Center Library.

Hiebert’s drawings, often taller than 6 feet, are sometimes reminiscent of Japanese brush paintings, with delicate lines that hint at landscapes. Others feature bolder strokes. Behind a few, there are quirky stories. For one drawing, she made erasures with an electric sander. For another, she drew it at a farm, placed it on a muddy road, then drove over it, leaving tire tracks and gravel pockmarks on the paper.

Her definition of “abstract,” written on a wall of the exhibit, is simple: “Abstraction is the most direct expression. It’s not about anything hidden or something extra you have to understand.”

Judd’s minimalist work, “Variations on a Theme,” includes “Untitled, 1977–78,” 16 etchings from the museum’s permanent collection; though the rectangles and their variations look like line drawings, they’re not done by his own hand, but printed by his father, Roy.

*The current exhibits are on view through Sept. 9 at the Hudson River Museum, 511 Warburton Ave. The museum is open Wednesday to Sunday from 12 to 5 p.m.*