

Phil Solomon

American Falls, 2008–2009

September 26–October 1, 2008

Performance Space

The project that I am currently working on is titled *American Falls*. Upon completion, it will be a six-channel, surround-sound digital video installation; and it is scheduled to open concurrently with an exhibition of the photographs of Edward Muybridge at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 2009. The installation will be projected on the walls of the Corcoran's neoclassical rotunda about two blocks from the White House.

American Falls was initially inspired by seeing the great Frederic Church painting of Niagara Falls on a wall right outside the rotunda during my first visit to Washington, D.C. After being completely immersed in Church's famous *Niagara* (which people used to pay money to see like a cinema show), I envisioned creating a large-scale work enveloping the beholder on all sides—standing in the middle of a roaring, ceaseless force of nature, a vertical falls of American history in constant, ever-shifting motion, eventually emptying into the seas.

This work would be created in the spirit of the old WPA Federal Art Project murals from the 1930s (inspired by such artists as Diego Rivera and created during a brief shining moment of enlightened government support for the arts). I envisioned creating a 360-degree audio/visual immersive environment, a wall-to-wall painting/sculpture in motion, a cine-frieze, a visionary, dream-like pageant of American history, particularly focusing on the photographed 20th century. The images will be originating on *film*, using the extraordinary optical printing and chemical techniques that I have been "developing" over the past several years. This will endow the projected electronic images with a deep, gold-plated organic texture that is simply not possible to reproduce with digital technology alone; it's a fortuitous marriage of 19th- and 21st-century technologies. The iconic and recognizable images will emerge and submerge, form and coagulate into figures from a primordial chemical soup of the collective American dream of history, then dissipate into lava-like pools of swimming emulsions, waterfalls of light on water transubstantiating into moving sculptures (created with a special bas-relief technique that I've developed), giving the images a palpable, three-dimensional quality. The complex sound design will be a montage of voices, sounds, and music (in the polyphonic spirit of Charles Ives) from the last century of American history, an oceanic montage mixed in Dolby surround with speakers placed above the viewer around the rotunda.

I want the imagery in *American Falls* to be "sculpted" somewhat in the spirit of the various war memorials that are spread throughout the Washington, D.C., area surrounding the Corcoran—but my "moving" memorial will be a liquid, lucid dream of the country's news-reeled collective memory, an endless American river of victories, failures, promises, tragedies, faces, hopes, heroes, and villains (and Hollywood's tinsel dream factory), etc. Images from the Revolution and the Civil War, Edison, films of industry, natural disasters, the

dustbowl, the Depression, WWI and II, the Hindenburg, home movies of American families, iconic moments of the cinema, on and on... a streaming American pageant, an ode to the last century as we head toward the unknowable future, a plaintive lament for the "falls" of history.

The aesthetic inspirations for the project come from a wide range of artists, from the beautiful narrative panels of Giotto's chapel in Padua to the bronzed reliefs of Donatello's doors, to the heroic and vivid golden memorial for Robert Gould Shaw's (African American) Civil War troops at the National Gallery of Art, to the monumental textures of the large-scale historical paintings of Anselm Kiefer. I am also inspired here by the fluid, moving time-portal of history from Harlan Ellison's fascinating time fantasy in the *Star Trek* episode *The City on the Edge of Forever*. Niagara Falls, the northern border of our country, will be photographed and "mounted" on both sides of the rotunda during the first third of the piece, a vertical curtain of water from which images will emerge then submerge—then all six panels will transform, emptying out into the oceans for the middle section. During the final third, the walls of the rotunda will transform into a virtual aquarium as we submerge and go under the sea, with echoes of history bouncing off the surface above, where we now see the aquatic tombs, the barnacled monuments of the dead, the falls from our follies and our desperately won victories... Washington, D.C., as Atlantis... It must be made clear: my project, *American Falls*, is ultimately one of great hope, stemming from a life-long love for this American experiment of ours that seemed so vivid to me during my (television-infused) childhood; but it is also necessitated by my deep concern for its present and future directions. Whither this ship of state, as they say?

—EXCERPTS FROM PHIL SOLOMON'S "PROJECT SUMMARY—INKLINGS, IDEAS, HOPES, AND DREAMS FOR AMERICAN FALLS (CREATING A SISTINE CHAPEL FOR THE AMERICAN DREAM)"

This preview screening was made possible by the Thatcher Hoffman Smith Prize, awarded by the University of Oklahoma in 2007. Jessica Betz has worked on this piece with me for the past several weeks with artistry and dedication, and it simply wouldn't see the light of day without her invaluable assistance and her unfailing good will and enthusiasm.

This single channel presentation of the 3-screen preview currently running at the Untitled [ArtSpace] in Oklahoma City is dedicated to the historical candidacy of Senator Barack Obama, in celebration and with hope for the future.

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Three channel video (displayed on one monitor) from hard drive, color, stereo sound; 30 mins.

Phil Solomon will visit the Wexner Center on October 1 to present a program of his films and videos and to discuss this installation. Additional programs of Solomon's films will be screened on October 9 and 16. Visit wexarts.org for details.

Wexner Center for the Arts

The Ohio State University