

Emerging Artistry: Mary Coble, Blithe Riley, 'Ascension/Immersion' at Conner Contemporary Art

By Shauna Miller
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Mary Coble knows something about endurance. Over nearly a decade as a performance artist, she's endured hours under a tattooist's needle, hauled gallons of water up and down ladders, and stripped duct tape from around her bound chest in the name of art. Most recently, the pursuit of art led the former D.C. resident to an abandoned spring house deep in the Maine woods with Blithe Riley, a New York-based video artist.

There, on a spring day in 2009, Coble clambered down a ragged hole in the shack's roof to splash down into dark, neck-high water. She then heaved herself — barefoot and soaking wet in jeans — back up through another hole. She repeated this action over and over silently as Riley filmed. The resulting Coble/Riley Projects video piece "Ascension/Immersion" is on view through April 30 at Conner Contemporary Art.

The piece was the duo's first joint effort after meeting in 2009 at Maine's Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Coble says that the collaboration began with an agreement to strip away any context from the action on screen. "We are both very wary of narrative, and the spring house had a 'fairy-tale feel' that we didn't want to overshadow the work," Riley explains.

In the video, the cramped spring house fills two split-screen frames. An inside shot shows the womblike interior as Coble drops down, swims through and re-emerges onto the roof. (Riley

operated the inside camera on a floating board.) The outside roof shot is equally tight, with nothing to distract the viewer from Coble's delicate but awkward balancing act scrambling over the slick wooden surface. The piece plays in an infinite loop, the repetition creating a meditative effect.

But what does it all mean? As in much of Coble's solo performance work, a simple, physical action is elevated beyond its face-value meaning. There's something ethereal about watching the human body labor for no meaning beyond its value as a beautiful, difficult action — a theme Coble connects to the "endless travel" of life.

Coble says that this process began with the artists as they waded through the murky water and continues with the viewer experiencing the finished piece.

When the duo first set out, "we had been talking a lot about the mental space of performance, specifically related to endurance," says Coble, who is now based in Copenhagen. "We had many discussions describing that mental state as in between reality and the world that's constructed through the performance itself."