



Brooklyn Based

With ROIL, Christine Sciulli mesmerizes, intimidates and provides the perfect selfie setting

by Regina Mogilevskaya



Photo: Regina Mogilevskaya

Christine Sciulli's medium of choice is projected light. "It's like standing in a darkroom, rocking a tray of developer in anticipation of the photograph's first hint of an image," Sciulli says about her work. "To me, it is about trying to harness the ineffable." And harness it she does in **ROIL**, her **mesmeric installation at Smack Mellon**, a gallery in a historic building below the Manhattan Bridge in Dumbo.

Walking into ROIL is, at first, an act of apprehension. You step into an industrial space with the windows blacked out; all street noise immediately halts with the shut of the heavy door. As your eyes adjust to the darkness, you start to distinguish a sprawling landscape in front of you. It seems to unfurl from every corner of the room—wisps of light that swirl and coil across the space. There's a fantastic dichotomy to the energy that the piece builds—although the gallery is almost silent, the work itself seems to buzz with crackling movement. As you journey deeper into ROIL, your mind roams free associating foam racing across the ocean, lightning, ribbons, waves, cracks rippling through the earth, all spilling over and across and into one another. The choreography is hypnotic.



Photo: Regina Mogilevskaya

While ROIL casts an atmosphere of the ethereal, its fundamental intricacies are actually full of geometry and technology—eight HD projectors, 2,7000 safety pins, and 2,000 feet of white tulle. The projectors (which project 2D circles made using Apple Motion 5) are mounted at various angles in the space, while bunches of fabric hang from a scaffold of mason's cord, which is thread from the columns and walls. "Smack Mellon is the largest interior work I have made, and the vast amount of space was electrifying," Sciulli says. "Because of the leisurely installation schedule, I was able to create a truly site-specific, large-scale work, instead of designing ROIL off-site and 'fabricating' it."

The quiet darkness and immersive nature of ROIL has an intimidating effect. "It is funny to see visitors walking into the space so slowly," says Suzanne Kim, director of exhibitions at Smack Mellon. "They first need to get their bearings, but once they take it all in, of course they take a million selfies!" Kim explained that due to the size of the installation, visitors are naturally cautious as they approach; most will stand at the edges of the piece, as if in a trance, while a few brave souls dip down under the fabric and go straight to the heart of it.

"To me, one of the most fulfilling ways to view the work is to lock in on a specific area and follow the lines as they move through various densities of the fabric" Sciulli said. She added that she wants visitors to move around the space to observe how changing the viewing angle affects the perception of the projections.

While ROIL's quiet power brings natural elements to mind, the inspiration for this piece was actually largely industrial. Robert Gair, an inventor who pioneered a paper factory empire in Dumbo, once owned the Smack Mellon building as well as many others in the area. When Sciulli dug into engineering journals from the early 1900s, she pieced together that the main gallery area was used for steam generation. "The movement behind ROIL represents the energy required to send water molecules into the pressurized frenzy needed to power the industrial complex of Gairville," Sciulli explains. So not waves or lightning, exactly, but rippling force fields and water in a state of change, nonetheless.

Sciulli seems to have an affinity for spaces where what simmers beneath the surface is felt with a palpable vibration, even when invisible to the naked eye. Her dream space? The rift valley in Þingvellir, Iceland, in mid-winter. "It's where the Eurasian and North American continental plates are pulling apart," she says. "It's a site full of raging geothermal activity including geysers, boiling mud pots, steaming lava fields and sulfur vents." For now, you can experience [ROIL at Smack Mellon through Feb. 21.](#)



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