

Drifting Lithophanes

by Finch, September 2015



“Perhaps a human language is possible in which the intent of meaning is actually beheld in three-dimensional space.” — Terrence McKenna

“The computer is the essential medium for the simulation, that is for the emulation of processes for simulation within a model.” — Peter Weibel, via *Quantum Cinema*

Where weather patterns collide, storms gather. Appearing to those on the ground as moments of chaotic destruction, storms denote a boundary, a node of translation between two disparate systems. The same can be said of the objects inhabiting Laura Greig and Justin Cooper’s work *Drifting Lithophanes*.

Twelve small plastic squares, borne of a 3D printer and rigged to rotate 'round a handmade windmill, make up the primary material of the work.

These squares are representations of climate modeling simulations. The climate model, it should be noted, not only represents/illustrates an idea of a weather system, but second, it projects that idea into a three-dimensional universe of computation. Inherently, it proffers an argument for how weather is to be thought of, and describes our relationship to it. It is a nonverbal projection of organizing logic. This model of weather systems then passes through a three-dimensional printer, a machine which, in its construction of the object, layers on its own principles of organization and expression as it layers globules of plastic. The square we see is a topographical snapshot, or one moment, of the weather system, subjected to the construction rules of the three-dimensional printer.

Models, systems of knowing and representing, and all of their imaginary outlines brush at each other. Is this printed, physical map of systems itself, then, not a storm gathering between systems of computational pressure?

It's fruitful to note what a strange thing this is, to take a picture of a computational idea, to wrest a concrete moment from a temporal software simulation which sculpts dynamic objects happening in time, via a machine which sculpts static objects happening in space.

(This begins to touch upon Bill Brown's thing theory, in detouring the object out of our normative relationship to it: "Why not let things alone? Let them rest somewhere else – in the balmy elsewhere beyond theory." The longing for just such relief is described by A. S. Byatt at the outset of *The Biographer's Tale* (2000). Fed up with Lacan as with deconstructions of the Wolf-Man, a doctoral student looks up at a filthy window and epiphanically thinks, "I must have things." He relinquishes theory to relish the world at hand: "A real, very dirty window, shutting out the sun. A thing.")

Moving past the thing-ness of the plastic shapes I'd like to make apologies to Brown and move away from the real, and examine again the labor these things perform: the work of the model.

Drifting Lithophanes quite literally illuminates the various shifting roles of the work that models perform, as sites of scientific transcription, communication, and instruction. *Drifting*, and its cozy lightbulb (calling on aesthetics of the lone inventor/artist laboring under a single naked bulb), make transparent the apparatus of abstraction inherent in modeling.

Here the model is a performative object, working its influence in disparate ways throughout multiple networks of knowing.

As aforementioned, twelve small plastic squares, 3D printed topographic maps of weather systems, are attached to arms extending in uniform lengths from a small electronic windmill motor. The motor forces the rotation of the squares, causing them to pass in front of a single lightbulb, at which point the thickness of their layers can be beheld, illustrating representations of stratified cloud formations.

The physical apparatus of rotation imitates and points to (again, the work of the model) the natural or actual movement of weather systems, yet by virtue of its overt constructed-ness (the viewer can plainly see the sticks, the motor), exposes that the mental operation is itself a construction.

The history of lithophanes and their representation of three-dimensional space is yet another thorny iteration of the model. The word "lithophane" derives from Greek "litho," which is from "lithos" which means stone or rock, and "phainein" meaning "to cause to appear" – is this not the work of a model? Does it not "cause to appear" not only an image of a system, but our entire mental conception of that system?

Here are models nested: our cognitive conception of the world, the way we perceive its shape, its properties, and all the relations therein, facilitated the engineering of a computational model of weather systems. This computational model was ostensibly

built and programmed for purposes of prediction, as the weather, grouped into its own set of systems slipping over the surface of the planet, looms large in the way we move about the world.

Greig & Cooper's *Drifting* unhinges the invisible infrastructures of systematized perception. It drifts delightfully, tugging the viewer along between the representational and the performative, between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional, the computational and handmade, known and unknown, earth and sky.

