

Portable Gray

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In Rosa Barba's solo at Corbett vs. Dempsey, all the works on display involve film, but only one is projected. The Berlin-based artist has landed carefully at her Chicago debut, which comes with no shortage of market-friendly wall-based pieces—kinetic or static. On the other hand, iconic pieces on display underpin her conceptual complexity, encapsulating the idea of defining a speculative realm beyond the traditional confines of cinema, where film is broken into and then reconstructed from two essential elements: movement and light.

One Way Out (2009), a more renowned work, demonstrates such a process. The sculpture shapeshifts slightly every time it is shown, but the setup always involves a 16mm projector that projects film looping through a giant ventilation tube that hovers right above it. As it were, the vent sucks the 16mm film up, swirls it, and throws it perfectly back into the projector. Exactly how this works, though, remains a mystery to me. The projected white light highlights marks accumulated from the film rubbing against the metal cylinder as it travels up and down through it and the projector; it is the witness to the film's own disintegration.

Barba's newer wall-based pieces—such as the exhibition's titular work, *Poised Compression* (2023), a kinetic “painting” that creates entropic curves and lines as motorized spools wind and unwind rolls of blank films, and, on the opposite wall, fresh iterations from *Weavers* series, which are framed woven celluloid film—are beautiful collectibles to behold or to meditate with but are a tad short of excitement.

What occupies most of the gallery's floor space, though, is a classic. *Color Clocks: Verticals Lean Occasionally Consistently Away from Viewpoints* (2012) comes as a triplet of free-standing fan-shaped lightboxes akin to a metronome, displaying what looks like a gear mechanism inside a clock. In each of the lightboxes, a lever slowly seesaws, rolling back and forth a long strip of 35 mm film that is

threaded through a set of spools. The clocks are identical, except for the film stock each contains; three clocks represent the three primary colors. Against a background of a said color, the name of that color is spelled out, letter by letter. There's light, movement, celluloid film; the culminating projected image, however, is saved for the viewer's imagination.

Each letter has somewhere between 18 and 24 frames, which is about a second or so of moving image. In a thought bubble that pops up from the top of my head, I run a smooth projector, untethered by physics—a virtual cinema—and I feed the film strip to it, frame by frame. The screen is lit up, flickers, “R,” “E,” “D,” flickers, red background, black background; it ends but quickly restarts. I could hear my virtual projector's hum, even though it doesn't need to hum; it could well be the sound from *One Way Out*. Over and over, the letters are on the verge of losing their meaning. They are freed from their semiotic responsibilities and melt into images of colors and shapes, not to be pinned down by language, not to be actualized by representation.