

Worldmaking and Wonder

From afar, *At the edge of rain* depicts what appears to be clouds or cloud-like formations. They are portrayed as illuminated — perhaps by evening moonlight or sunlight on an especially dark and dreary day. Then again, are we looking at clouds or at what might be the beginning of the formation of the universe? I argue that the answer is *both/and* rather than *either/or*.

Sharyn O'Mara's work depicts a blurry and evocative liminal space — somewhere between here and there, now and then, day and night, heaven and earth, and even life and death. To explain, the clouds/stars are formed from an amalgamation of the hair of several of O'Mara's French and German shepherds, including one who passed away.¹ Dogs shed for various reasons — often seasonally — to make room for a new healthier coat. In this way, the old coat is meant to be jettisoned. Hair is typically seen as a nuisance in a domestic space — it must be vacuumed, brushed off, or disappeared. O'Mara, though, I presume, sees it as something to cherish but not as a fetish so much as to engender and instantiate worldmaking. It is worth noting that the dogs' names are Ramona Luna, the divine personification of the moon in Roman mythology, Juno, an asteroid between Mars and Jupiter, and Lumi, old Norse for light-bringer.

Our engagement with *At the edge of rain* could be described as premised upon many of the perceptual, cognitive, and affective states historically attributed to wonder, which art historian Marsha Meskimmon argues is a prerequisite to worldmaking. She writes that these states include “the rupture of the familiar by the appearance of the unfamiliar; a visceral, vertiginous and immediate response compelling an attitude of contemplative enquiry; a temporal suspension characterized by close attention to specific objects.”² Wonder marks the titular “edge” between the known and unknown.³ As Meskimmon further notes, to venture beyond the edge is to enter a risky proposition but worldmaking “is premised on interconnectedness with others and an openness to difference.”⁴ In the process, our relationship with the ordinary is



At the edge of rain Sharyn O'Mara, 2022
digital prints on architectural glass, LEDs Fleisher Art Memorial

forever changed. As another example, O'Mara's stunning series of digital prints from 2018-present compose chandeliers that connote elegance and value but are realized through quotidian dog nose prints on glass.

The architectural setting of *At the edge of rain* underscores the importance of wonder: it is in one of the three tall, narrow, rounded arch window portals on the west wall of the Fleisher Art Memorial's deconsecrated Romanesque church. Much as light streaming through stained glass windows was meant to create the condition of wonder that opens heaven on earth, O'Mara's artwork produces the condition for us to see the ordinary as always – already – extraordinary.

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About the artist

Sharyn O'Mara is an interdisciplinary artist. Her work is interconnected by her interest in the marks of language and the language of marks. In her practice, she resists the fast-consumption-culture of media and image, working instead to make physical/material/tangible the experiences of loss and longing that permeate our lives. Through these works, she acknowledges the moments of quiet and empathy that are most often overlooked, the subtle imprints that would otherwise fade without notice. Often working with the residue of daily life that is usually swept away, her work marks existence and reminds us of its fleeting nature.

O'Mara's work has been exhibited in the U.S. and abroad, and is in several private and public collections, including the Corning Museum of Glass, Toledo Museum of Art, and Arkansas Art Museum. She is Associate Professor of Glass at Tyler School of Art and Architecture at Temple University.

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At the edge of rain is the first permanent work of art in Fleisher Art Memorial's deconsecrated Romanesque sanctuary in almost a century. Support for this project was made possible by the Edna W. Andrade Fund of the Philadelphia Foundation. The artist wishes to acknowledge the support of a Temple University sabbatical as critical to this project.

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¹ Multimedia artist Laurie Anderson has also made work partially inspired by the passing of her dog Lolabelle.
² Marsha Meskimmon, "The Precarious Ecologies of Cosmopolitanism," *Open Arts Journal*, no. 1 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.5456/issn.5050-3679/2013s03mm>.
³ Serendipitously, O'Mara will be teaching an undergraduate art seminar focused on wonder, something I was not aware of when writing this essay.
⁴ Meskimmon.



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Chandelier for the one I carried close
 Sharyn O'Mara, 2018
 digital print:
 canine nose prints on glass