

303 GALLERY

Philips, Christopher. "Kristin Oppenheim at 303". *Art in America* (September 2002)

Art in America

Kristin Oppenheim at 303

"Paralyze the muscles of the eyes" was the ominous, hissing refrain that ran through Kristin Oppenheim's labyrinthine new sound installation, "The Eyes I Remember." Extending from wall to wall across 303's spacious front space were nine tall partitions—wooden frames covered by tautly stretched white cloth—that were arranged in parallel to form narrow corridors. Set into every partition were one or more doorways, each just wide enough for a single person to squeeze through.

As you groped your way through this maze, your attention was caught by the cryptic utterances echoing from audio speakers mounted high on the walls: "I can shut the door, turn on the lights and be surrounded by precise reflections." (The words were adapted, in many cases, from the more disorienting passages in cult novelist Iain Banks's *The Bridge*.) Oppenheim clearly wants viewers to learn to explore space through listening, not looking,

and in this case the multilayered audio mix is one of her most successful efforts to date. Nevertheless, the extremely claustrophobic character of the installation placed a definite limit on the time you were willing to spend following the work's aural twists and turns.

Those who successfully navigated the maze encountered a surprise when they emerged into 303's rear gallery. There, placed on individual white pedestals at eye level, were seven imposing glass tiaras. Each of these hand-blown pieces bears a girl's name (*Lizzy, Rosemary, Isabelle*), chosen, the artist says, principally for its sound. The front section of each tiara consists of a glass ornament, in designs ranging from a simple inverted V with a mounted diadem to an elaborate bent-wood curve. Rising from the back section of each tiara is a pair of oddly shaped glass forms that only after a perplexed interval become recognizable as rabbit ears. Oppenheim says she has long been fascinated with rabbits as symbols of fantasy

and magical transformation, and she has for years filled sketchbook pages with images of the creatures. These sculptures, both comic and regal, show the artist effectively expanding her repertoire of themes and techniques.

Another of her innovations was a series of three color photographs employing superimposed exposures of the face of a pale blonde girl. Oppenheim says that these works grew out of her efforts to find a pictorial equivalent for her audio experiments in layering vocal sounds. In each of these photographs, the subject's changing expressions, which extend from mildly happy to calmly attentive to quizzically distant, are combined. The result is a visual evocation of an emotional chord that is both intimate and affecting.

—Christopher Phillips

Kristin Oppenheim: *Ruby*, 2000.
hand blown glass, 15 x 11 x 7 inches; at 303.

