

## REVIEW: TROPIC OF GEMINI

Kooi, Meredith, Art Papers, May/June 2016

On the evening of March 17, 2016, at the Atlanta Contemporary, Kirstin Mitchell walked in a shifting videoscape of a sought-after paradise. Commissioned by Dashboard, the performance is the second in a series of works Mitchell calls *Momentum Exercises*, a stripped-down and raw performance for the artist, whose past performance persona Kiki Blood often took on aggressive sexuality and voyeurism themes. In *Tropic of Gemini*, the audience instead encounters a comparatively vulnerable embodied performer: clothed in a simple white bathing suit, shoeless, Mitchell faced the audience, walking at a slow pace on a pink-belted treadmill that had been retrofitted to tilt down.

Mitchell's newest work is highly processed-based; a 30-second performance requires months of experimentations. The first of her *Momentum Exercises*—titled *One Shot*, and installed and performed at the show Dash Initial at Antenna Gallery in New Orleans—was executed after a summer of archery exercises at a residency at The Art farm Serenbe in Serenbe, GA. For the performance of *One Shot*, Mitchell effectively shot a single arrow through a hanging stack of paper; the arrow was caught, fixed in motion, and never “arrived” anywhere. *Tropic of Gemini* expands upon this suspension. Mitchell never actually landed anywhere in her three-hour-long walk; her effort to walk nonetheless suspended her in anticipation of a virtual tropical paradise.

*Tropic of Gemini* distills a quest to find and inhabit that paradise into a three-hour performance, in which Mitchell walks on a customized treadmill before a video image collage of oceanscapes: boat rides, beach scenes, airplane flights, and walks through tall seaside grasses. The artist was adamant about the work being billed as a performance by Kirstin Mitchell, not by Kiki Blood—a move that bespeaks a more meditative, “slower” direction. This turn arguably started with Mitchell's self-described “performalist self-portrait” photographic project *BIG DEEP*, comprising solo performances for the camera. Instead of the parody-pornography of Blood's work, these more recent, more intimate performances convey an eroticism reminiscent of what Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of Text* (1975), wrote about the flash of skin, the wrist between the glove and the sleeve. *Tropic of Gemini's* is, similarly, a grown-up sensuality.

These state and status of paradise remain ambiguous in *Tropic of Gemini*. Mitchell positioned herself front and center before her video projection, which at times produced satisfying optical illusions, as the artist appeared, for instance, to be walking along a dock, away from water or, alternatively, to be walking into the ocean from the beach. Would a morning jogger pass behind her? And was Mitchell approaching or leaving the paradisiacal landscapes that backgrounded her walk? The continual strolling, the circuitry of the treadmill belt, made the viewer wonder about the work required to attain “paradise.” In one way, this work feels deeply, personally Mitchell’s. In her review for the ArtsATL website, artist Stephanie Dowda called the performance a “walking meditation”; indeed, *tropic of Gemini* was informed by Mitchell’s personal meditation practice (an influence we began to see with her residency project at the Highland Inn, Atlanta’s answer to the Chelsea Hotel, in 2014). Dowda’s review becomes clichéd where it suggests that Mitchell’s performance was, on some level, an easy embrace of “life’s imperfections.” Rather, the body and soul Mitchell put on display in *Tropic of Gemini* was serenely troubled by ambivalence, subtly provocative, and, despite its seaside ripples and linen atmosphere, anything but truly comfortable.