

All that Remains is Light
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Review by Julie Dault

Lucy Pullen recently wrote a letter to David Bowie informing him that she had named one of her photographs after his 1977 hit *Sound and Vision*. "I don't want to be known as a title poacher", she says of her determination to reach the rocker directly. Bowie would no doubt appreciate Pullen's work: She wraps objects with highly reflective cloth - material stardust, if you will - and uses them as subjects for her photographs or building blocks in her installations. The photograph in question is a black and white study of a speaker covered in this reflective material. It is a typical Pullen. With help of German fabric supplier Gunold und Stickman, Pullen has been working with this substance for some time, experimenting with its reflections and glowability. Normally used on jogging suits, safety gear and running shoes, she discovered that when viewed in a certain light, the material hovers and looks digital or even ethereal. "This material is incredibly active," she explains, launching into the science behind the effect. "if the viewer is mid-point in a straight line between the light source and the sculpture, the material glows. And it responds differently on film. It kicks a hole in the photo and replaces the object with an aura."

In *Rope Swing*, at right, a photograph of two girls swinging from a tree, Pullen wrapped the long rope of the swing with the material; it looks as if the girls are swinging from a bolt of lighting. *Aesthetic Theory* brings reading to light, with one book on a shelf illuminating the rest of the collection. Lecture turns the metal armrests of a university classroom into a starry sky. For Pullen, who has studied at Cooper Union, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the Tyler School of Art at Temple University, and now teaches at the University of Victoria, her literal re-insertion of the aura into her images is no accident. It's a playful response to the influential German theorist Walter Benjamin and his notion that with the mechanical reproduction of art comes the loss of artistic authenticity - what he calls the aura. With the exhibition *Everything is Illuminated* (whose title is, in fact, taken from Jonathan Safran Foer's bestselling novel; like Bowie, he received a letter from the artist) Pullen is using her flashy auras in an installation made up of 11 photographs, nine wrapped and thus brilliant ladders and 1004 astro-neon-pink-marbelized bouncy balls scattered across the gallery floor. I'm principally interested in the viewer having agency," she explains. "I want there to be a reciprocal relationship between the beholder and the beheld." By grouping the ladders in sets of two, three and four, the viewer is forced to physically manoeuvre through the installation, driving an ever-changing perspective and lunimescence.

Also included in the exhibit is *Ashhole* (or more delicately, *Wooden Standing Construction*), a thin sculpture made from ash that Pullen steamed and moulded in her very own steam box, which she constructed in her studio from 1850 designs. The sculpture is perfectly balanced on two pencils. With her magic material, Pullen is bridging heavy German theory and playful visual experimentation - and braving all sorts of media to do it. When asked if Bowie ever responded to her letter, she laughs and excuses him. "Well, he is on tour." Who knows? Maybe he'll stop for a brief but illuminating experience.