

MARY TEMPLE PAINTS RICE GALLERY VISITORS INTO A CORNER

DOUGLAS BRITT AT 5:11 PM ON FEBRUARY 2, 2011

A visitor to Rice University Art Gallery might assume at first glance that the museum is between exhibitions. The place is empty except for the shadows cast by trees outside.

But a closer look at where the shadows strike the floor and walls with respect to where the building's windows are situated reveals that's impossible. Those shadows aren't created by light streaming in from outside, but by the hand and paintbrush — make that many tiny paintbrushes — of New York artist Mary Temple.



Mary Temple, detail of *Northwest Corner, Southeast Light*. Photo: Mary Temple

Welcome to *Northwest Corner, Southeast Light*, the latest makeover of Rice Gallery's ever-changing space. Inspired by how Temple pictures a swath of sunlight appearing in the gallery's northwest corner, it's a "light installation" whose basic elements aren't fluorescent bulbs or neon tubes but wood stain and house paint.

Temple used the stain on a wood floor that takes up most, but not all, of the gallery, effectively giving the piece a pedestal, however short and wide. This articulates the space occupied by the artwork, which in turn breaks out of that space, because the shadows painted on the wall extend beyond the defined area.

This in turn toys with your perception further. I found myself looking back at the windows of Sewall Hall, where Rice Gallery is located, to make sure they weren't responsible for at least some of the shadows I was seeing, even though I knew they couldn't be. This was even after I had noticed some of the relatively painterly passages on the floor. (Temple says she likes leaving a few traces of her hand for observant viewers to notice.)

Similarly, you may feel a twinge of surprise when, walking across the wood platform, which Temple has protected with layers of polyurethane, you don't cast any shadows.

The imaginary, shadowy canopy gracing the wood platform and walls is a composite of trees from New York's Central Park and the Menil Collection campus. Some limbs are seasonally bare; others appear to be in full bloom, as if spring were well under way. The effect is that of suspending what would otherwise be a fleeting moment — the kind Temple suggests you might experience on a lazy Sunday, when you have time to notice and enjoy the light.

You can learn more about Temple's process when she gives a talk at Thursday's reception and again at noon Friday. Fortunately, understanding how she's painted you into a corner doesn't make that corner any less nice a place to be.