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Film is dead. Long live film. Corbett vs. Dempsey, Rosa Barba disavows analog nostalgia

by Pia Singh | July 30, 2025



Installation view of Rosa Barba, *Poised Compression*, Corbett vs. Dempsey
Credit: Robert Chase Heishman

Video art has come of age at a time when generative AI is immediately replacing its capacity to produce images of the ur-real. We have entered a disembodied space of swallowing whatever the screen feeds us as opposed to ingesting images, once delicately inscribed on celluloid's silver halide surface. The metaphysical and social significance of filmic visuals is now obsolete. Film is dead. Long live film.

Redirecting our attention from two-dimensional digitality to the technological aspect of film, Corbett vs. Dempsey (CvD) presents Rosa Barba's first Chicago solo presentation in "*Poised Compression*." Comprising a selection of pivotal works, some from "*The Ocean of One's Pause*," the artist's solo at the MoMa earlier this summer, CvD presents five deconstructed cinematic apparatuses where Barba probes the material and conceptual agency of film against an anthropomorphic understanding of mechanical time.

Seemingly every analog fetishist's fantasy, Barba disavows that nostalgia by recalibrating parts to perform differential mechanical flows. Teasing out habitual processes of the technical from the technological, the title work, *Poised Compression* (2023), performs a perpetual motion of unbecoming. Three metal sprockets repetitively turn looped, red film strips in a clockwise-counterclockwise ballet. The muscular architecture of celluloid grows tense and releases, leading to a cascade of soft curves of unspooled film

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at the bottom of a metal frame. The shortness and longness of time seem no longer contingent on where celluloid is cut, nor on keycodes at the perforated edge. Instead, a system of mechanical parts performs a relatable, haptic, submissive kind of melancholia.



The title work, *Poised Compression* (2023), performs a perpetual motion of unbecoming. Credit: Robert Chase Heishman

An ambient guttural moan fills the gallery in a site-specific installation, *One Way Out* (2009). Routed to appear as an extension of the overhead HVAC system, a large cyclonic metal armature connects the interior of the space to the exterior. Vacuuming up and release-feeding a clear roll of film through a projector on the floor, celluloid gathers atmospheric imprint, dust, and scratches as it stutters through metallic and pneumatic instruments. Particulate matter enlarges as shadows as the vent sucks and spews film in front of projected light with cyclical breath. A metallic tick and clack of latch-arm releases score the metabolization of disappeared film as a corporeal dynamism is formed between the antiquated machine and the sound of gestational processes. One is forced to reassess the assumed durability of celluloid as archival material, which, like all good and true things, is fated for obsolescence.

Barba's use of mechanical fragments and looped film, at times inscribed with text, situates her inquiry in the field of language, light, sound, and sculpture. A recent addition, *Sensible Suns* (2025), models the structure of an armillary sphere, an early astronomical device with concentric metal rings used for reading celestial bodies. In Barba's contraption, three overlapping circular planes interact with a light source at its rearmost end. Front and tail elliptical frames hold polarized films that tango in opposite directions. In between, a collage of transparent cellulose tape rotates on a square glass slide. The foci of the elliptical orbits reveal a cubist, sunset-hued abstraction, an area of polarized filtration where light travels through cellulose to meet the human eye from a specific angle. Possessed by the phenomenon of movement and illumination, Barba meets Mondrian, Delaunay, and Braque in her rhythmic abstractions. Her transcorporeal material engagement with film enacts a posthuman ethics, one in which rhythmic patterns and flows of movement, circulation, production, and reproduction are all embodied by subjective components, including ourselves, leading us to a deeper understanding of the politics of vulnerability.