

Art Review: Listening to art, Looking at silence Voice and Void at Aldrich

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Bring your ears to the "Voice & Void" exhibit at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum.

That the museum ventured into the edgy, aural art world is exemplary. Sound works in this show tickle an unsuspecting part of the brain - a departure from visual art. The diverse, intriguing work has visual jump-starts that prompt your imagination, then lead you to the sound. Although there is much heady conceptual theory explaining each piece, the trick is to just look and listen, soak it up and see where it takes you.



Open
(Contributed photo)
Dec 16, 2007

The chance approach to art is redolent of the Fluxus art movement of the 1960s where performance, visual and sound art held little distinction between art and life. Championing the movement were noted artists John Cage, Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik, among others. The Aldrich show pays homage to Cage and Beuys. A gem is the yellowed pages from Cage's "Lecture on Nothing (Silence)" (1959), exhibited in a glass case showing experimental text floating between large spaces as irregular tacets. The words, on 8x11-inch sheets of paper, run horizontally and read like a musical score with side notes in Cage's hand.

Beuys, the infamous performance artist and sculptor who straddled the Fluxus and the later avant-garde movements, is represented here in large photographs of his 1965 performance, "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare," at Galerie Schmela, D'Ysseldorf. The silver gelatin prints by photographer Ute Klophaus show Beuys with his face covered with honey and gold leaf, cradling a dead hare. According to museum notes, Beuys was mumbling into the hare's ears, taking on the role of shaman. Artist as shaman is a sub-theme in the Aldrich show that connects sound and silence to spirituality, all vehicles for self-contemplation.



Sneeze
(Contributed photo)
Dec 16, 2007

Inspired by Beuys, performance art in this show is present as much as it can be without actual performers, except for the two live parrots in Rachel Berwick's "may-por-Ž."

The parrots occupy a large translucent aviary replete with lights, tropical sounds and flora, allowing us to see only shadows. Berwick was inspired by the 18th-century German discoverer Alexander von Humboldt who found a parrot that belonged to the MaypurŽ people who were exterminated by a Caribbean tribe that Humboldt was visiting.

Berwick trained the birds to "speak" a few words of the extinct language and through these and other parrots the language has been kept alive into the 21st century. Language minus the people that speak it lends to the sense of "void," and the bird's shadows cast on the aviary walls pose them as a missing link between us and a forgotten people.

As intellectually driven as this show gets, there is some fun. Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's "Opera for a small room," is a mixed-media installation with sound, light, voice and music.

Peering in the large window of the free-standing, overcrowded room we see covers of long-playing records spilling over every surface, packing bookshelves, leaning next to old radios, speakers, books. Six record players randomly drop their needles on circling vinyl while crystal chandeliers twinkle on and off in different colors. Orchestrated in a 20-minute repeated sequence are several audio layers of Italian opera interspersed by a male narrator (Miller) who also sings a bluegrass song titled, "Roadkill Crow Song."



Opera for a Small Room
(Contributed photo)
Dec 16, 2007

Miller and Cardiff modeled the old room as one that belonged to a reclusive man in Canada who collected opera records. Visually vacant but audibly occupied, you can hear someone moving around. This is a performer-less performance and ultimately it's the sound, not the room that captivates. The key to the persona of the occupant is entirely aural.

Also fun is "Open" by Julianne Swartz, a minimalist piece that fascinates while getting some giggles.

A plain wooden box sits knee-high on the floor and when you open it, it triggers voices saying, "I love you." If you keep the lid open, the voices overlap and get louder. The interactive opening and closing of the box lets us eavesdrop on this verbal intimacy.

Close-up photographs by Anna Gaskell taken of her sneezing hold the moment and garner the same anticipation you get just before you sneeze. The silver gelatin, digital fiber prints elicit that "inner ear" experience, forecasting the split second phenomena which in this case is held forever in the frame.

"Voice & Void" is a gregarious exhibit that gambles on concepts being the glue between sounds, silence and visuals. The experimental approach might have something to do with curator Thomas Trummer, an Austrian and first recipient of the Hall Curatorial Fellowship at the Aldrich. This new program invites international curators to create shows with artists from this country and abroad. Trummer's show is refreshingly different.



How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare.
(Contributed photo)
Dec 16, 2007

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"Voice & Void" runs through Feb. 24 at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main St., Ridgefield. Call 438 4519 or visit www.aldrichart.org.

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