

SEEING SOUND / Gordon Monahan at the College

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Audio installations are doubly difficult: they negotiate visual aesthetics, but aural ones, as well. Rarely have I encountered work in this genre that is as seductive, as beautiful and as haunting as in *Gordon Monahan / SEEING SOUND / sound art, performance and music 1978 – 2012*. What is even more amazing is that this is one of “nine exhibitions occurring across Canada and in Berlin from 2011 to 2013...Each gallery will present different work from Monahan’s career creating a national and international retrospective of one of Canada’s most respected sound artists”. *SEEING SOUND* is diverse and enthralling: I want to see the other versions / exhibitions, as well.

As Monahan has been making work longer than I’ve been alive, you know that there is an intense idea behind each piece (often explained very succinctly in a brief accompanying blurb). They can also simply be enjoyed on a visceral, immediate level. For example: *A Very Large Vinyl LP Constructed in Acoustic Space*, in the lower gallery, allows you to sit in the middle of eight loudspeakers, and with “easy listening” classics playing that seem to move around you in the circle of speakers, with pops and scratches and other detritus noise associated with vinyl, and the physicality of the medium. You can ‘hear’ his process or be lulled by the odd and alternating “noises” that seem to swirl about you. Monahan produced *Vinyl LP* while in a residency at the U of R: another example of the superiority of that fine art department. Here, we have MFAs playing in Emma Lake mud, literally and metaphorically: but I digress.

This physicality of sound is a theme with *SEEING SOUND*. This is literal, in works like *Sound Objectified*, in the upper gallery. A number of objects – popcorn popper, VCR, printer – defined by their familiar noises as by how quickly they become obsolete sit on a variety of podiums. Each emits the expected audio: pops, or other mechanical whirrs and clicks and such. I can’t help but feel the nostalgia as these abandoned things speak to me, or each other.

Near *Sound Objectified* are four objects that meld the previous tropes of aesthetic form and audio. *Resonant Platinum Records* hang in the space, suspended from the ceiling, and the four discs give off what I can only describe as metallic feedback, sometimes subtle and almost inaudible, other times harsh and putting my teeth on edge. This work raises an issue with this show : you need to experience *SEEING SOUND* alone, to experience it well. Some of the works can hardly be heard at times, and that is their charm : other works, such as *Erratum Addendum*, which also has multiple speakers, requires a longer consideration, or a more attentive audience (as the composition here is a reworking of Marcel Duchamps’ *Erratum Musical*, a precursor to the ‘chance music’ we know from the works of John Cage). The solemnness and seeming erraticness of the notes give the space a ghostly feel, best experienced without distraction.

Other works are less calm, more frenetic, and though serious, are also very playful and funny. *Theremin Pendulum* is a darkened room where a mechanized pendulum with a theremin antennae swirls and moves in the black space with an LED on its end. It’s really all you can see, illuminating and casting shadows in the space as it makes various sounds that are overlaid and mixed. You can edge about the space (cautiously) and imagine that this theremin wire is reacting to you, sometimes in a threatening and unwelcoming way. At the opening reception, the noises from this room were loud and ongoing. When I returned on numerous occasions and was the sole person in the room, the interactions were more nuanced, and less shrill. And very trippy.



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Spinning Twisted Wires has bells sometimes going so fast that they're silent. They have a sexy, steam punk look : at the opening, I was like a cat following a bell toy. But the work that is my favourite is not, in fact, located in the gallery. It sits outside the College Gallery, on a rough wooden block with steps leading up to it : this is *A Piano Listening to Itself – Chopin Chord*.



The wires that run from the piano to the speakers atop the College Building are faint : and the keys on the piano are gripped by torturous tools that seem brutal. Music comes from the piano, seemingly without explanation, and the piano itself seems to offer a few notes here and there. This is a work – like many in the show – where knowing how it functions is nice, but not necessary. *A Piano Listening to Itself* is enchanting, and perhaps knowing that “audio recordings are transmitted into the long piano strings using vibrating coils attached to the wires, which cause the piano strings to vibrate in sympathy with the audio signals. The vibrations in the long piano strings are amplified by contact to the piano soundboard” is too antiseptic and cold. This work is romantic, out in the rain and playing music for whomever is there to listen, and even if no one is listening at all.

SEEING SOUND is an odd, enchanting series of audio works and installations and even video. It's varied, and luckily, is up until the fall, allowing multiple “listenings” and interactions.