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Now Hear This

Gordon Monahan's idiosyncratic sound art draws multi-gallery retrospective

By Murray Whyte
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The title of Gordon Monahan's 33-year retrospective is "Seeing Sound," which should be your first clue that the artist and composer likes a little play in his work. Seeing sound? Why don't you try smelling colour, while you're at it?

Monahan is nothing if not the impish experimentalist, tapping into the elemental nature of sound - how it's created, captured, reproduced, disassembled and put back together again - to expose forces so taken for granted we hardly know they exist. "Seeing Sound" comprises work from 1978 to 2011 (a 33-year retrospective, for the audio nerds among us, is the RPM of a long-playing LP), and sprawls in time and space from Saskatchewan to Oshawa to Berlin, with multiple points in between.

This is how things get done: You could wait a lifetime for a Canadian museum big enough to accommodate all the work to take on Monahan's idiosyncratic oeuvre, so it's up to a cluster of small public institutions to cobble together a collaborative agreement to see that such important retrospectives get done.

It's not so much triangulation as hexangulation: Component parts of "Seeing Sound" opened on the weekend at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, which organized the whole thing, as well as the E Gallery at the University of Toronto in Mississauga. Another portion has been open at Barrie's MacLaren Art Centre since February, and another since April 7 at the Tom Thomson Gallery in Owen Sound. The inaugural chunk closed at U of T Scarborough's Doris McCarthy Gallery a week ago; various works will open in Chatham, Sackville (N.B.), Saskatoon and Berlin through the summer and fall. A book launch for the entire exhibition takes place at Art Metropole in Toronto May 7.

Geographic challenges notwithstanding, "Seeing Sound" is an important cross-section of an important Canadian artist's career. Think of it this way: How many Canadian students of legendary conceptualist composer John Cage are engaged in a trans-Atlantic career (he splits time between Berlin and Meaford, Ont.) that captures the irreverent virtuosity of the master? My count is exactly one: Monahan, and Monahan alone.

Don't take my word for it. Make the trek at least as far as U of T Mississauga, where you enter a darkened, below-ground gallery to encounter a 3-metre-tall Plexiglas cylinder, spot-lit and filled with water.

It's called "Aquaerolian Whirlpool," from 1990, and the whole thing has the rough, do-it-yourself look of a high-school science experiment: A small motor below the tank siphons the water out and pumps it back in, whipping and curling it into a whirlpool.

Piano wires are anchored in an arc at the bottom of the tank and stretched vertically to a soundboard above it. As the water whorls, the vibrating wires are amplified, producing a sound that's elemental, primal, chilling. In the long darkened space, the tension between the junk-shop sci-fi contraption and the primordial voice it conjures is near-transcendent - silent but for Monahan's ingenious machine for listening.

Up in Barrie, Monahan concocts a similar experience, more subtly played. For "Chimney Stack," a work he created specifically for the MacLaren, the gallery's lobby fireplace is glassed in.

Monahan fits the structure with harp strings. Fluctuations in temperature and air current do the rest. As the fire sends heat into the room, the wires warble a penetrating drone. When the door opens, the room's air pressure and temperature change, provoking shifts in pitch and tone.

There's a childlike curiosity to these works, assuming a sonorous force to all things. But that's hardly all Monahan has to offer. Upstairs at the MacLaren, Monahan's "A Very Large Vinyl LP Constructed in Acoustic Space," from 2007, fiddles gleefully with acoustics, architecture and composition itself.

In the middle of the room, the top of a round bench is painted to look like a record album. Speakers surround it, projecting an eerily unstructured soundscape that shape-shifts from majestic and sublime to disheveled cacophony and back again. "Shape" is both apropos and an oxymoron: The track is a pastiche of various bits and pieces from Monahan's voluminous record collection - "a collage of surface scratches and vintage easy-listening records," he says - that travel from speaker to speaker around the listener in a weirdly irregular orbit. The experience has a subtle, then compelling sense of motion, making you oddly aware of your static self, pinned at the centre.

Like other works, there's something vaguely primal here as the sound fragments shatter and recombine, groping almost organically toward an equilibrium it flirts with but never finds.

Who can't see their way clear to that?

Gordon Monahan: Seeing Sounds continues at U of T Mississauga's E Gallery to May 22; the Tom Thomson Gallery, Owen Sound, to May 26; the MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, to May 29; and the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, to June 12.

Monahan performs at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, May 6 at 7 pm.
Book launch for "Seeing Sounds" at Art Metropole, 788 King Street W. in Toronto, on May 7 at 1 pm.