



PREVIEW

ART & EXHIBITS

Art, sound and science collide in Moody Center's 'Soundwaves'

The Rice University gallery pulls together works that combine music and visual art.

Andrew Dansby February 11, 2022, Updated: February 15, 2022, 9:42 am



The pieces *This was Nearly Mine* and *Medicated Shield* by Jamal Cyrus are part of the exhibition *Soundwaves: Experimental Strategies in Art + Music* at The Moody Center for the Arts, Friday, Feb. 4, 2022, at Rice University in Houston.

Photo: Mark Mulligan, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

With all apologies to the wonderful percussionists out there: Imagine all the times you've been roughly greeted by drums, which so often generate the rhythm of marches and funerals for fairly obvious reasons. Percussive instruments are our musical heartbeat. The drums and drummers are innocent. They're just doing what they're charged to do. But sound can be an unforgiving greeter.

Like a trumpet in church or a yelp in an art gallery, the isolated drum can have a bracing effect. Which should make Anri Sala's "Last Resort," a daunting gate to pass through for "Soundwaves: Experimental Strategies in Art + Music" at the Moody Center for the Arts and its central gallery.

But the exhibition is not daunting in the least. The artist inverted more than three dozen snare drums and hung them in the gallery space to create gentle and beautiful shadows and sounds. They exist in the foreground and background, creating an enveloped environment without vertical partitions along the site. The piece is as engaged with the viewer as the viewer allows.

Mozart plays in the background, and mechanisms activate the gently hinged drumsticks at the heads of each instrument. They behave with controlled chaos: vibrations set the sticks to tapping, offering a gentle pulse beneath a very structured piece of music. I imagine one could enter this piece 100 times and experience something different. The mix of art and sound and science is so immersive as to erase distinctions between these spaces of practice and study.

Move from this piece into the Brown Foundation Gallery and one is greeted by an actual humanoid form. Nick Cave's "Soundsuit" from 2013 is one of his signature creations borrowed from local collector Lester Marks.

Cave started creating his artistic armor — rhythmic and wearable suits — as a response to the Rodney King attack decades ago. By placing it at the entry to this gallery, executive director Alison Weaver clearly wanted to invite those attuned to a certain sort of empathy. She framed the spacious room brilliantly with two very different works of art — both influenced by water as much as music — on the gallery's two largest walls. Spencer Finch's "Reflections in Water (After Debussy)" is a mesmerizing wave-based light fixture on one wall. The work is bright and glossy and three-dimensional, with its light elements offering texture through curvature. Opposite it are 31 works by Jorinde Voigt, which get their texture through layers rather than lights. Both works — one independent, the other a collection — exude the feeling of being adrift among sound waves.

As a result, the spaces in between are hardly marginalized and instead enhanced. They find their way to the surface in this contained ocean of art and sound. Some of the pieces are meant to be gazed upon. Others are visually enticing, while also fully realized with physical interaction. Throughout this exhibition's run, there will be events where artists come and activate some of the pieces, emphasizing the connection between sound and vision.

The breadth of the work is startling, both for its international scope and its materials and presentation. Some of the works are actual instruments, such as Turkish artist Nevin Aladag's "Body Instruments" — a rainmaker hat, a drum hat, accordion wings and foot bells — all created last year, that will be activated in a performance in April. Naama Tsabar's "Transition" is a deconstructed amplifier that invites viewers to participate at any point. There are also portals to history, as with two works by Houston artist Jamal Cyrus that create a scene, a mood and an evocation. His "This Was Nearly Mine" and "Medicated Shield" speak to the city's musical past, with a painted facade connected to the city's storied Club Ebony and the sanctuary of a church pew.

Another Houstonian, Jason Moran, contributes a pair of pieces. Both “Repeat the Spin” and “Pas de Deux I” were made last year with pigment on Gampi paper utilizing the piano that has made Moran a leading light of 21st-century jazz and music connected to the history of America and Africa.

Amid all the art and sound Christine Sun Kim’s “Pyramid Series” stands out, because the artist combines a loose formality of sheet music with a sharp wit to represent those who cannot hear. The pieces use song structure — repetition and refrain — to try to create a sound for those able to hear. The artist wields both humor and codified familiarity to express a frustration from those who feel outside. In doing so, she welcomes others to imagine experiences that elude her and others.

Viewers are welcome to take one-and-done passes through “Soundwaves.” But so much of the art pulled together in this exhibition proves more rewarding across time, with elements that reveal themselves differently with long views or subsequent views. And events are scheduled throughout its run, where some of the art comes to live with performance.

‘Soundwaves: Experimental Strategies in Art + Music’

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through TKTK

Where: Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University, 6100 Main

Details: free; 713-348-2787, moody.rice.edu

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