The arts

‘Drum Listens to Heart’ is an exhibit for the eyes and ears

By Max Blue | Special to The Examiner |  Sep 16, 2022 Updated Sep 20, 2022

There’s cacophony and chorus, dissonance and harmony, clutter and rhythm. These are just some of the words we use to understand music, but they can be applied to other art forms, too. “Drum Listens to Heart,” a three-part exhibition at the California College of the Arts Wattis Institute, brings together contemporary artists and performers from around the world to explore how visual art can embody characteristics we often associate with music.

In both visual art and music, ambition and scale are often related. In art, this tends to be measured in physical size. In music, it is often measured in length. “Drum” is both large and long: One of its most unique curatorial decisions being to present the single exhibition in three parts, each with a different ensemble of artists riffing off the same score. Part one features 12 artists working across painting, sculpture, video and installation, spread throughout four rooms in the gallery. Only some of the artworks actually feature sound.
In many of the works, sound is simply implied. Michael E. Smith’s untitled installation features a red laser rising and falling like a metronome across a black sweatshirt pinned to the facing wall. Occupying a room all its own, this piece sets the tempo for the rest of the show, quietly keeping time, while bringing to mind the stringent use of sound in the military, here a much freer expression. Barry La Va and Lee Luzano approach the percussive nature of impact in two, complimentary pieces: A shattered stack of glass panes and a painting of a hammer.

The exhibition takes its title from one of four included sculptures by the late Milford Graves. Graves’ complex, mechanical assemblages feature motors, lights and screens, all looking a little like a mad scientist’s Rube Goldberg machine. In “Pathways of Infinite Possibilities: Skeleton,” 2017, the titular skeleton holds a hand drum, the skin of which reads “Drum listens to heart.” The rest of the piece includes an electronic audio interface, tangles of wire, plastic models of human bodies and internal organs. Aside from their direct allusions to sound, it’s all the tiny moving parts of these sculptures that evoke musicality: assemblage as ensemble.

The exhibit “Drum Listens to Heart” at the College of the Arts Wattis Institute runs through Oct. 15. Impart Photography
If Smith’s piece sets the tempo, the two larger rooms operate like movements, while the other single-room installation, Em’kal Eyongakpa’s dark, immersive environment, batu kẹnọ XI-rh/babhi-bẹrat XII-r [babhi-manyẹp/babhi-bawọt, (mban)], 2022, is the exhibition’s gentle crescendo. The life-size, tree-like structure made of string features several hidden audio devices, playing a mix of prerecorded and filtered ambient sounds, fully embodying the concept of a rest. I could – and did – sit inside it for hours. The ability to set one’s own pace is something rare in listening to music, but typical of looking at art. The time-based nature of many of the works in “Drum” encourage – and reward – longer visits.

Furthering the musical theme, Wattis is hosting a pop-up shop for which local record stores have provided percussion-based albums. There’s also a jukebox in the corner of the shop, loaded with music, interviews, performances, readings, lectures and conversations from the California College of the Arts archive. And there’s a robust slate of live musical performances scheduled throughout the exhibition’s run.

But does the first installment of “Drum” find its groove, its harmonies? Does it ever fully sing? It might be too soon to say. Like a symphonic movement in a larger suite, it feels incomplete, anticipatory. Music unfolds over time, ungraspable in a single moment. That’s the particular wistfulness of music; as soon as we’ve experienced it fully, it’s over. But that isn’t a detractor – like the best musical experiences, it gives visitors to “Drum” the feeling that they are witness to a fleeting magic.

If You Go

“Drum Listens to Heart Part I”

Where: Wattis Institute, California College of the Arts, 360 Kansas St, S.F.

When: 12 p.m.-6:00 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday through Oct 15

Tickets: Free

Contact: 415 355-9670, wattis.org.

Max Blue writes about the visual arts and modern culture for the San Francisco Examiner and other publications.