Extreme art

Technology inspires latest exhibits at Wood Street Galleries

BY SHERI SHAW
Tribune Review Art Desk

You don't have to be into art to appreciate the piece "Deconditioning" on display at Wood Street Galleries. An installation made of water, sound and light, it takes up the entire second floor space of the downtown Pittsburgh gallery. And though those three components sound simple enough, what's amazing is how they all come together in this work of art to allow visitors to see several physical phenomena.

Basically a gigantic trough of water underneath which loudspeakers emit a multitude of slowly everlasting sounds and vibrations creating a variety of undulations and rippled patterns on the water's surface. It is dramatically lit by a sequence of lights that reflect the undulations onto the gallery's walls.

The end result is sound made manifest in both physical and visual forms with the added benefit of creating a meditative, almost hypnotic, environment.

Murray Horne, Wood Street's director and curator, describes it as a "combination of water, all the sounds and a Japanese garden." In other words, it is a sort of contemplative space or experience, one that is so enchanting that several visitors have been compelled to sit through the entire 60-minute programmed cycle of the piece.

Created by the international trio Plumbing for Beginners (Thomas McInniss, Emmanuel Madan of Montreal and Midiko 'hi-tech/lo-tech'

When: Through May 15, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays; 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays

Admission: Free

Where: Wood Street Galleries, 601 Wood St., downtown Pittsburgh

Details: 412-471-5605 or www.pgharts.org/woodstreet/tm

Hynnisutn of Helsinki it is an installation display part of the exhibit "hi-tech/lo-tech," which is presented in conjunction with the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust's Kleeves Festival, a celebration of the visual and performing arts of Quebec.

The remaining works on view in the exhibition, which are up on the third floor, do not offer such a visceral and all encompassing experience, but nevertheless, they are just as compelling.

For example, Montreal's Jean-Pierre Gauthier creates sound installations out of such unlikely things as motors, pumps, and objects collected from everyday life such as saws, chucks, pipes, buckets, even eels.

Two installations in this exhibition display how Gauthier can combine such disparate objects to create multifunctional systems that generate sound.

In one, titled "Lo grand n'over," Gauthier presents an automatic machine for spinning dolls in the form of a janitor's cart full of blowin' servents. As the sound of clapping dolls fills the entrance to the gallery, where the piece is located, the bubbles themselves slowly build up in shape, which bag and cart until overflowing, ultimately ending up on the gallery floor as a day's end.

In another, "Specs on," Gauthier creates a sense of scale by using a massive arrangement of electrical conduit pipe and sides to which he has attached various rods (Goldberghian type) motorized reconstructions made of everyday objects from plastic ties to post-its.

Each of these is hooked to an amplifier, which is connected to a sound source. But even more interesting, all of these are connected to motion sensors, and so when one walks through Gauthier's men, it comes alive with the varied sounds of all of these little contraptions. This makes for an experience that is something like being caught in a mound of snow and with all the noise, none of the pain.

A bit more harmonious, both literarily and figuratively, is "Ecole d'aviation," or "School of Aviation," by Diane Laffay, of Quebec City. An installation comprised of 23 multicolored umbrellas set atop poles of different heights at the bottoms of which are attached small motor-driven accordions.

As the accordions slowly below, the umbrellas slowly open and close. But they do so intermittently, which, in a way, alludes to an individual's breathing. This adds a sense of personification to each of the umbrellas, accordions, units that, when grouped together, transforms the piece into something akin to a dancing chorus.

What is that has to do with light, as the piece's title infers, is lost in this reviewer, but "Ecole d'aviation" certainly takes off from the kind of overtly technology-oriented and equally techno-inspired, multimedia works that most have come to expect of Wood Street Galleries in recent years.

What's important to keep in mind about all of these works is that, although they all have some high-tech component that sits in their function — in Laffay's "Ecole d'aviation," in which each work is set-up and is hooked up to a controller that in turn is connected to a computer — they are all emerging in the real, something that is a very low tech assumption.

In other words, those sounds coming from Gauthier's motion detector controlled piece are immediate, real and of the moment, whereas the bubble coming from his janitor cart, twirl and overflowing.

As Homer has always maintained, "Art is always push technology to an extreme. They never stand still. It's the same with video and new media artists." At least here, in this exhibition these artists have pushed their work more into the extremes of reality. Which is what makes each piece so successful.