‘Time + Data’ lights up a thoughtful funhouse

By Eve Moczydlowski

If you’ve strolled Downtown along Wood Street recently, you may have noticed a large arrangement of lights that doesn’t seem to jibe with the holiday decor revealed on Light Up Night. That’s because the oversized electronic display above the entrance to the Wood Street T stop has nothing to do with Santa’s elves, duck Frost or Yuletide carols. Rather, the 6-foot by 6-foot piece is part of Jim Campbell’s “Time + Data,” the latest exhibition at Wood Street Gallery.

Constructed of 166 light bulbs and Campbell’s custom-made electronics—and appropriately titled “166 Light Bulbs”—the illuminated piece shows, on a timed loop, a darkened silhouette of a man running on a beach, traversing sand dunes and strolling to the ground in a mesmerizing rhythm. Then it starts all over again.

“166 Light Bulbs” is an enlarged version of several glowing red arrangements shown on the gallery’s third floor. Among them is “Running Falling Cut,” a smaller piece that, using LED lights, shows a dissected body whose shadowy silhouette is sleek in half. Over and over again, the legs take off as the torso and head try to catch up.

At first, “Running Falling Cut” is, like many of Campbell’s pieces, a funny image. Charlie Chaplin, like Wood Street curator Murray Horne puts it. But there’s also a serious, more philosophical side to the artist’s work, as it generally reminds us that life is a continual battle to catch up with ourselves.

Now based in San Francisco, Campbell studied electrical engineering and math in the late 1970s at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and that know-how shines through in his work: he constructs the LED pieces and works such as “166 Light Bulbs” by videoediting an image, computerizing the visual data, then streaming the digital image through the tiny red LEDs (or, in some cases, larger light bulbs).

In “Photo of My Mother,” a black-and-white photo under a layer of glass is rhythmically obscured by a foggy film that appears and disappears in synch with Campbell’s breath, which he measured and recorded for an hour in January 1996. “Portrait of My Father” is similar, though it’s blurred more rapidly in synch with Campbell’s heartbeat, as recorded for eight hours in 1995.

This use of bodily functions as a method for timing artworks is a theme for Campbell. “Cyclical Counter-baseline,” a clock whose second hand jibes along at the same pace as “Her Breath,” the viewer is left to speculate who “her” might be. Next to it, “Cyclical Meter base-time” contains a second hand that ticks according to “Her Blushing.”

A metal box of electrical equipment mounts a few feet below each clock, connected to a horn with wire, supplying the timepieces with the data. The same type of boxes is used to time the blurring of the portraits of Campbell’s parents.

Other pieces in the exhibition use video cameras and touch screens that involve the visitor in the art itself. “Languages of Reference” is a tiny suspended video camera that circles around the room, capturing the viewer at some moments and projecting the image onto a nearby wall. Such surprises make walking through the exhibition almost as perplexing and entertaining as finding your way through a funhouse.

With his inventive technology, Campbell transforms rather commonplace subjects—family, parents, religion, sexuality—into enigmatic and perplexing themes. Just make sure you look up if you’re walking past the Wood Street T stop. It’s easy to miss the elevated “166 Light Bulbs” when walking right under it.

The show, which Horne said took five years of planning to bring to Wood Street Galleries, runs through Dec 22.

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