



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 sync with a recording of artist Jim Campbell's breath. "Portrait of My Father" is similar, in sync with Campbell's heartbeat.

'Time + Data' lights up a thoughtful funhouse

By Eve Modzelewski

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, Jack Frost or Yuletide carols. Rather, the 6-foot-by-8-foot piece is part of Jim Campbell's "Time + Data," the latest exhibition at Wood Street Galleries.

Constructed of 168 light bulbs and Campbell's custom-made electronics — and appropriately titled "168 Light Bulbs" — the illuminated piece shows, on a timed loop, the darkened silhouette of a man running on a beach, traversing sand dunes and stumbling to the ground in a mesmerizing rhythm. Then it starts all over again.

"168 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 sliced 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, as Wood Street curator Murray Horne puts it. But there's also a serious, more philosophical side to the artist's work, as it gently 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 "168 Light Bulbs" by videotaping an image, computerizing the visual data, then streaming the digital image through the tiny red LEDs (or, in some cases, larger light bulbs).

'Time + Data' a funhouse

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Campbell writes all of his software, designs his own circuit boards and has 16 video imaging patents registered under his name, Horne said. And, unlike other artists who use technology as the subject of their works — sometimes satirizing society's dependence on it — Campbell seems to use technology as a means to describe completely different topics.

For example, an untitled work in a darkened room of the gallery uses eight ultrasonic sensors to detect motion whenever a viewer walks into the area. From a distance, you can see a black-and-white video of two supine naked men projected onto a horizontal surface of salt.

However, the closer you get to the projection, the more out-of-focus and unrecognizable the bodies become. Again, the artist's sense of humor shines through — it's as if Campbell is reprimanding the viewer for being voyeuristic, for trying to get a closer look at this most intimate of moments. And, also again, a more philosophical point is made: Sometimes, the closer you are to a situation, the harder it is to understand it.

As innovative as Campbell's works are, he doesn't mind blatantly taking inspiration from other artists. His "dynamism" photographs are inspired by Futurist painter Giacomo Balla's 1912 piece "Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash," in which a pet dog's feet are shown as a blurry windmill of motion. Similarly, Campbell's "Dynamism of a Cow" and "Dynamism of an Automobile," both illuminated through light boxes, are intended to show movement using a single static image.

Nothing in "Time + Data" is devoid of movement. Even motionless snapshots of Campbell's mother and father turn into dynamic images when combined with electronics, glass and LCD material. In "Photo of My Mother," a black-and-white photo under a layer of glass is

systematically obscured by a foggy film that appears and disappears in sync 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 sync 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 base:time" is made of a clock whose second hand glides 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 Blinking."

A metal box of electrical equipment mounted a few feet below each clock, connected to them with wire, supply 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. "Frames 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 the way through a funhouse.

With his inventive technology, Campbell transforms rather commonplace subjects — family, parents, religion, sexuality — into engaging 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 "168 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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