



Rob Tarbell and Douglas Boyce fuse visual art and musical composition

Abstract grace

by : Sarah Sargent

A collaboration between visual artist Rob Tarbell and composer Douglas Boyce, "Bird-like Things in Things Like Trees" was conceived two summers ago during an artist residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in Auvillar, France. While there, both men became captivated by a distinctive birdsong. Their unsuccessful quest to identify the bird became a kind of metaphor for their situation as strangers in a foreign land trying to figure out what people were saying and how to navigate an unfamiliar landscape.

Tarbell had initially intended to continue the lyrical smoke paintings he's known for, but became ill and couldn't do them. The most he could manage were small colored ink drawings. He would begin working after Skyping with his pregnant wife back in Charlottesville, likening his artistic transformation to a kind of Couvade Syndrome (sympathetic pregnancy). His work came with a newfound freedom, and though he didn't know they would have a girl, he used plenty of pink ink. The drawings showcase Tarbell's assurance with form, gesture, and composition. His colors are vibrant and inventive in their pairings, and it's clear he's reveling in color after years of working with smoke.

Tarbell is clearly interested in space. In his large pieces, he layers ink-tinged polyester several inches above Mylar (imparting a hard candy luster) to create pieces that seem to hover in space. Light is an integral part of the work, and he uses it to play with foreground and background: It passes through the translucent ink, staining the polyester surface to hit the Mylar below, which reflects it back onto the surface in patterns that echo the ink image on top. To underscore this expansion outward from two-dimensionality, Tarbell jettisons the rectilinear picture plane for more unconventional amorphous shapes.

Both opaque and translucent, with surfaces that recall the Mylar, his glass horns reference gramophone horns (a café in Auvillar put a gramophone outside each day to play, providing a soundtrack to the VCCA fellows' experience), which, as Tarbell says, "give sound a visual presence," tying in nicely with his collaboration with Boyce. "Obscura Horn: I Woke Up in a Camera Obscura" refers to the serendipitous camera obscura created by a hole in the wall of Tarbell's room. "I awoke from a nap to find a real time movie of cars driving by, people walking, the bridge, trees, sky, and clouds clearly projected on the ceiling and on two walls above and around me," he said. "'Obscura Horn' parallels that phenomenon. One horn brings the outside scene (the cloud) in and sends it through the wall, out through the other horn and onto the ceiling.



"Horn 1, 2012" is one of the camera obscura pieces included in the exhibit at Les Yeux du Monde. (Courtesy of Les Yeux du Monde)

Rob Tarbell and Douglas Boyce, "Bird-like Things in Things Like Trees"

Les Yeux du Monde

Opening reception July 13

I was particularly taken with Tarbell's most recent work "Volée et Brûlée" (a reference to a spate of car thefts and burnings occurring in France in 2010), small abstract paintings that reintroduce smoke. These are both graceful and substantive. Some are cut in two with exposed edges painted an arresting fluorescent orange. Tarbell uses the same paint on the backs and sides of the frames to produce a glowing aura.

Derived from the songs and flights of the Auvillarian birds,

Douglas Boyce's composition—in reality an interlocking network of compositions—is intentionally enigmatic and fragmented. "Speculative ornithology" is how he describes "Bird-like Things in Things Like Trees." In a larger sense, the piece is about conjecture and reality: How do we make sense of a world in which we only have access to its fragments.

"Bird-like Things in Things Like Trees" (presented in conjunction with the 2012 Wintergreen "Innovation" Summer Music Festival) is an ambitious piece, displaying the inventive nature of artists who take something ordinary like a bird song, pursue it in various ways, and arrive at interesting, existential responses. A live performance of Boyce's piece, featuring Harmonious Blacksmith, will occur on Friday, July 13 during the opening reception.

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