

ART REVIEW

At Mass MoCA, wondering about wonder

By Sebastian Smee | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 23, 2016

NORTH ADAMS — “They say,” wrote the British author Jeanette Winterson, “that every snowflake is different. If that were true, how could the world go on? How could we ever get up off our knees? How could we ever recover from the wonder of it?”

Well, the world does go on, and we recover, very often (as Winterson went on to say) by forgetting. A true state of wonder can be too much to bear.

And yet wonder is fundamental both to the creation of art and the pursuit of science. So it is fitting that it is the theme of an ambitious exhibition, “Explode Every Day: An Inquiry Into the Phenomena of Wonder,” at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

The show touches on the mysteries of sound waves, solar systems, and sibling relations; the weirdness of love, the rules of perspective, and much more besides. I could try to be more specific and tell you that it is about the wonder triggered by what we think of as scientific phenomena. But those phenomena (holograms, horseshoe crabs, the human heartbeat) are not just scientific, are they?

They’re poetic. They’re existential. They’re everything.

The title comes from Ray Bradbury, the author of “Fahrenheit 451” and “The Martian Chronicles”: “You remain invested in your inner child by exploding every day,” he once said. “You don’t worry about the future, you don’t worry about the past — you just explode.”

I can think of few artists who are more alive to the soft explosions of love, and to the poetry in scientific phenomena, than Julianne Swartz. Swartz’s sculpture “Lean” is an upright steel rod that bends at the bottom, tapering to a thin point. It stands close to a wall, but doesn’t quite touch. The mystery, for the viewer, is in this gap (the space in which love explodes?), and in how the rod remains erect.



Foreground: Julianne Swartz’s “Bone Score (Tangle).”
Photo credit to Tony Luong

Swartz says in the catalog that her earliest childhood experience with wonder occurred in a science museum, when she conversed, across a vast and noisy hall, with her father, via two large parabolas. A similar dynamic of intimacy at a distance, or distance within intimacy, is at the heart of all her work.

One of her pieces here is purely acoustic. Traversing the long walkway that leads to the Sol LeWitt wall drawings exhibition, you hear disembodied voices (recordings of the eight-member vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth) singing in brief harmonies (thirds and fifths), and holding sustained microtones.

Speakers along the corridor emit all of this, so that a spatial dimension is added to the sonic one. To those who have not experienced it, there is no way to convey how unaccountably moving it is.

Swartz has also filled a small gallery with lightweight sculptures that function as makeshift speakers. Each one trembles in response to acoustic vibrations. The sounds range from recordings made by the Kepler space observatory to whispers, heartbeats, and lullabies.

These pieces, connecting distance, intimacy, and sound, dovetail neatly with a fastidious arrangement of records, record sleeves, and sundry ephemera — a kind of bespoke boxed set — by Dario Robleto.

Robleto — one of the most original and compelling artists in the United States — has spent years collecting significant recordings of the human heart: the earliest human pulse, the earliest fetal heartbeat, the earliest pulse of a newborn baby.

He even has the first recording of a device, first implanted in a patient in 2011, that can displace the biological heart: a turbine-like machine with a rotating blade that whirs blood through the body. Its co-inventor, Texan cardiologist Dr. O.H. “Bud” Frazier, describes the sound as “a barren wind-swept landscape.”

The stories behind these recordings are riveting. They remind us of the often extreme degrees of intimacy, fragility, and even love that, unexpectedly, inform so much scientific endeavor. A heartbeat recorded in 1854, for instance, by the German physiologist Karl Vierordt, depended on a single human hair acting as a stylus. The first fetal heartbeat was recorded in 1908 using a soap bubble and a silvered glass thread!

One of the seven recordings collected by Robleto is the first human heartbeat to leave the solar system. It was included on the Golden Record, a compilation of music from around the world and greetings in different languages that was sent into space with the Voyager space probes in 1977. Voyager 1 left the heliosphere, or solar bubble, in 2013.

The heartbeat included on the Golden Record belonged to the project’s creative director, Ann Druyan. It was recorded just a few days after she and the astronomer Carl Sagan were secretly engaged. How wonderful to know that the sound of human life that aliens may one day discover is that of a heart in love.

In its wildness, eccentricity, and technical prowess, Robleto’s work connects with others in the show, including Charles Lindsay’s elaborate, mad-scientist installation, “Field Station,” which includes horseshoe crabs covered in 24-karat gold transmitting Morse code, humpback whale sounds, and songs; and Tristan Duke’s scratch holograms.

Duke has incised lines into metal discs so that when they rotate on a turntable they create holograms — illusions of three-dimensional forms that hover above the disc. (Are record companies, riding the wave of a renewed interest in vinyl by bearded, bicycle-riding hipsters, interested in Duke’s scratch holograms? You bet they are.)

There are many more works — not to mention ideas, story lines, and materials — in “Explode Every Day” than I can possibly describe here. In focusing on links among sound, intimacy, and extreme distance, I have touched on one of only several threads that run through it — and by no means exhaustively.

I have also omitted extraordinary works, such as “In What Distant Sky,” the specially commissioned video piece, filmed at Mass MoCA, by Megan and Murray McMillan; Christopher Gausby’s illuminated manuscripts recording his own philosophical musings and mappings; and Rachel Sussman’s hall-length diagram, “[Selected] History of the Space Time Continuum.”

The show was conceived and organized by Mass MoCA’s Denise Markonish. Markonish has convinced me over the last several years that she is one of the most audacious contemporary curators in the country.

If “Explode Every Day” has a flaw (and what lovable thing doesn’t?), it is the burden placed on viewers by a surfeit of back story in each work. In making the show about wonder, Markonish takes on a theme that, besides being gloriously fertile, is also unlimited. Wonder is everywhere, and so the show, in a way, is about everything. Everything might just be a little too much for a show to be about.

On the other hand, it is truly refreshing to feel oneself in the hands of a curator, and artists, who, instead of seeking to educate, edify, or otherwise improve us, are palpably out to enthrall us.

EXPLODE EVERY DAY: An Inquiry Into the Phenomena of Wonder

At Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, 1040 Mass MoCA Way, North Adams. Through April 2. 413-662-2111, www.massmoca.org.

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