

BROOKLYN RAIL

Critical perspectives on arts, politics, and culture

From da 'Hood to da Whitney: 3 Artists from Williamsburg Make Good

by Ellen Pearlman
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Julianne Swartz

Julianne Swartz uses light, motion, reflection, sound, and ambience as sculpture to take the ordinary and mundane and bump it up into the extraordinary and profound. She employs utilitarian and commonplace objects like conduits and condensers, mirrors, tubes, fiber optics, and lenses, and transforms matter that has no palpability or physical presence and gives it sculptural form. She works at the most delicate of intersections, where the fulcrum point of what is solid meets what is not.

In an early work, Swartz took a single red thread and wended it across a small town in Pennsylvania, mapping the space where a hate crime had been committed. It stretched from the site of the offense and traced how a single action impacted the path of an entire community. A later piece focused on a quivering strand of tinsel blown by an oscillating fan. A spotlight shines down on the tinsel. The image could only be viewed through a punched out, grapefruit sized hole in a wall retrofitted with a convex lens. A recent installation took place through a series of indoor and outdoor mirrors reflecting a garden of whirligigs blowing in the wind. Swartz has used a fiber optic thread of glass to delineate the synaptic interconnections throughout a gallery space, wending it into hidden walls and forgotten cracks.

Sound and light are endemic to our daily experience, but remain essentially ungraspable. We know from engineering and physics that they break down into pulses and waves, but believe we can only hold pulses and waves if we make them into functional light bulbs or radios. Swartz describes their invisible, ephemeral quality as possessing "sensual presence," and believes we receive them through our senses. She delineates sculptural form by making sound and light more palpable to an individual's mode of interpretation, which means you can't see them, but you can see the pathway of transmission.

Her installation for the 2004 Whitney Biennial runs six flights through the Museum's stairwell, a functional system that "irrigates" the height and depth of the building with voices that run through clear plastic tubing. The sound, conveyed by relays of air, builds layers of voices singing that ultimate anthem of longing, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" from The Wizard of Oz. The installation concerns itself with the "loss of innocence from childhood to adulthood" and a keen "longing for perfection." Using the people in her life, friends, co-workers, shopkeepers, even the superintendent of the building, she builds layers of digitized, unending waves of sound. The music invokes a fleeting intangible—memory and its overwhelming associative power—and taps into the "pneumonic part of the brain." At key points along the installation's traversal, there are also delicate diffused mirrors reflecting the movement of individuals in the stairwell back onto themselves.

This highly sophisticated work taps evanescent memory association to bring the invisible into form and then move it through clear tubing. She says her sculptures are narrative and sequenced, but are different from film in that film captures its audience through sequences dictated by time allotments. Her installation is fluid and contains sequences laced with narratives that allow the viewer to use the imagery of the audience itself, and float lazily through the space by allowing that moment, and that moment alone to direct the story.



Julianne Swartz, "How Deep is Your" (2003), site specific installation with sound. Courtesy P.S. 1 Museum, Queens, NY.