

Review: Park McArthur, An Exhibition

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Entering into the space of artist Park McArthur's current exhibition at Portland's Yale Union (YU) is a disorienting and jarring experience.

The room is noticeably bare, with only two large polyurethane foam rectangles facing one another from opposite sides of the room and the noises of shifting and changing sound files to fill the void.

After a moment or two, it becomes quite obvious that what appear at first to be part of the wall, small black rubber squares at about knee height along the perimeter of the room, are actually part of the installation, and two of these squares are not rubber, but speakers from which the sounds are emanating.

This game of revealing, of unveiling, of encounter with the slightly hidden – is one that repeats itself on multiple layers throughout the experience of the exhibition, and one that always makes sure to leave a bit still undiscoverable.



History Behind McArthur's Art

In the past, McArthur's work has dealt with issues of the disabled body and problems of access, and as McArthur herself is disabled and uses a wheelchair, her experience of the world strongly informs much of the art she makes. A previous exhibition of her work, entitled *Ramps* (2014) at Essex Street, NYC, consisted of a collection of wheelchair ramps arranged in a grid on the gallery floor, making it difficult to walk through the space.

Each ramp was on loan from various arts institutions in New York, and their varying sizes, shapes, and conditions spoke poignantly about levels of access at each institution. The work forced viewers to reckon with their own bodies – destabilizing them with challenges and discomfort analogous to Park's own situation of navigating a world that makes only provisional accommodations for those with accessibility issues.

When viewed through this lens, the Yale Union exhibition appears to be in a similar conversation.

The exhibition pamphlet tells us that the seemingly random sound files are gathered from “promotional robotic nurse videos, reports in the failures of state administered care, Nina Simone, a surgical procedure video, suicide notes, etc.”, and you only need to listen to hear the constant references to the body, the physically and mentally disabled, and the newly introduced machine stand-ins for physical doctors and nurses.

The sound files, made in collaboration with Alex Fleming, are arranged according to Markov chains: mathematical algorithms that are characterized as memoryless. These algorithms are part of the structural math all around us that run search engines, gauge financial markets, and organize the risks of health and life insurance policies.

Listening to these files, you can try to follow along in the pamphlet with the selections of sound files that are printed out in their entirety.

Most jarring however, is when other amorphous sounds join the chorus, seeming to emerge from the ether, the ceiling, or the foam structures themselves. They are deep, booming, echoing, bass-filled wobbles that interrupt and intermingle with the other tracks, sometimes drowning them out completely.

Printed at the end of the pamphlet are the names and descriptions of all the pieces present, and as none of the pieces have wall labels, the listing becomes a tool for reading through the exhibition. It exposes certain features of the room to actually be pieces in the exhibition itself and tells us what they are, like the previously mentioned black square forms around the room, which are revealed to be loading dock bumpers.

But this listing illuminates as much as it obfuscates.

Art That Questions

While the pamphlet explains certain elements in the space, it also poses a larger question – where are the several pieces listed that are not in the room?

The exhibition then becomes a game of hide and seek, one that pushes the boundaries of the walls of the gallery. After being told that these other pieces were around “somewhere,” I poked around into back corners and bathrooms of the Yale Union’s industrial building, finding one small painting in a bare and beautiful office space, and a hanging Posey restraint (used to restrain combative or dangerous patients in medical settings) in a private bathroom inside the kitchen.

There was one piece that I was never able to find, and this left me wondering if it even existed, or if it was meant to be unbound.

This search was indicative of McArthur’s attempt to question levels of access. What if I had never noticed the back listing, or asked about the other pieces, or put in the extended effort to find them? What if I had been larger, or in a wheelchair, and unable to pass down the thin corridor at the end of which was the office with one of the pieces inside? What does it mean to hide the posey restraint in a bathroom, behind two series of closed doors, a symbol of the secreted world of medical and mental health institutions?

These hidden pieces were a powerful comment on levels of access (physically and intellectually) to not only institutions and the art inside them, but to information and assistance.

Throughout it all, the two foam monoliths, one peach and one blue, stood solitary and alone in the main room with their plastic coverings pulled to the ground and purposefully left visible. Are they visual metaphors for an exposed body, or symbols for synthetic forms of care?

Or perhaps they are representations of the limits of a disabled artist’s body? These two structures remained the most mystifying and impenetrable parts of the exhibition, exuding a strong intentionality and necessity.

Be fully aware – this exhibition is dense and complex, and requires time and effort to fully engage with and unpack it, echoing again questions of access.

However, the reward is rich and eye opening, and the challenge will keep you reflecting and ruminating for days after your experience.

*Park McArthur, An Exhibition is held at Portland's Yale Union, 800 Southeast 10th Ave., Portland, OR 97214
Open Fri-Sun, noon-5 p.m., now through Oct. 19.*

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