

The Oregonian

New York artist Park McArthur explores how forces beyond our control shape our lives in installation at Yale Union (review)

By John Motley
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Last year, the young New York artist Park McArthur mounted an exhibition called "Ramps" at Essex Street on the Lower East Side, a smart, witty and personally grounded take on institutional critique. For the show, the artist collected 20 wheelchair-accessible ramps from galleries and museums in New York and New England and displayed them on the gallery's floor.

Ranging from professionally fabricated to resourcefully fashioned, the ramps visually riffed on Minimalist floor sculpture and found-object arrangements, but their message was far more direct. For McArthur, who is disabled and uses an electric wheelchair, these ramps facilitated her entry into the regional art spaces from which they were borrowed. And the discrepancy in the quality of the ramps' construction points to the varying lengths the lending institutions have gone to make public access to art equally available to all.

For McArthur's current exhibition at Yale Union, she continues to meditate on a handful of ideas related to "Ramps," including the limits of the body and the inescapable ways we are defined by forces beyond our control. But while "Ramps" made such a compelling point, here the artist's ideas never quite coalesce into anything as forceful or direct.

The new show seems designed to feel disembodied: the sparsely populated space is dominated by an audio installation, whose most important attribute is unseen. Created in collaboration with the artist Alex Fleming, it consists of a grab-bag of sound files — sourced from promotional videos for robot nurses, how-to videos detailing surgical procedures, and Nina Simone singing "Feelings," among many others — whose sequence is determined by the Markov chain, a mathematical system used to query search engines and assess financial markets.

Thematically, the sound files orbit an investigation of whether humanity is physically or psychologically rooted, while being constantly reshuffled according to an algorithm that has no stake in the debate. It's a wide-eyed appraisal of the unfeeling forces that invisibly shape our lives.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, McArthur's meanings are trickier to suss out. A pair of upright foam slabs — one peach, one blue — stand in the center of the space, the plastic shrinkwrap they were shipped in rolled to the floor like dropped trousers. They may be meant as stand-ins for bodies, physically calibrated to absorb whatever world the Markov chain crafts for them.

That idea is reinforced by a series of black molded bumpers, designed for loading docks, which have been installed inconspicuously throughout the space. In the works list, they're cited for their capacity to "endure years of abusive pounding." Perhaps this is how McArthur views the human body: As a kind of punching bag that should expect no better treatment than molded rubber, but, in spite of that, goes on wanting so much more.

Park McArthur

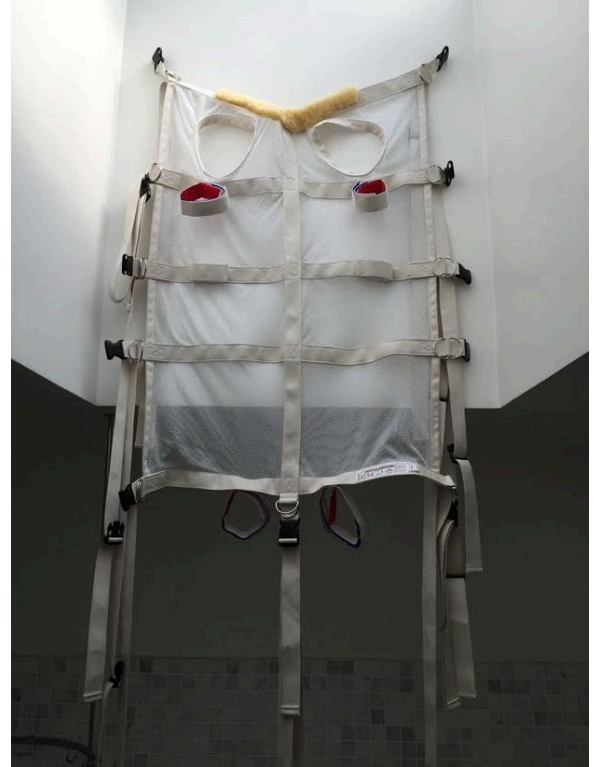
Where: Yale Union (YU), 800 S.E. 10th Ave., 503-236-7996

Hours: Noon to 5 p.m. Fridays through Sundays

Closes: Oct. 19

Admission: Free

Website: yaleunion.org



Park McArthur's current show at Yale Union includes "Posey Restraint," 2014.