

The
Next
Wave

Sonic Boom

Janet Cardiff crafts multidimensional art tours out of whispers, sighs, footsteps, and rustling leaves By Ann Landi

Janet Cardiff has broken the sound barrier. In a cavernous gallery at the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, New York, the slender, carrot-haired artist listens intently to her artwork *Forty-Part Motet*, as 40 stereo speakers blast Thomas Tallis's 16th-century composition *Spem in Alium*. The speakers are arranged in a huge oval, each mounted on a black tripod and delivering the voice of a different singer. A visitor wanders around the gallery, savoring the haunting, atonal harmonies of the Elizabethan composer's complex arrangement, or pausing to pick out the thread of an individual voice. After 12 minutes, the music stops, and the gallery fills with the sounds of the chorus members clearing their throats, coughing, chatting. And then the glorious voices start up again.

"If you look at the score," Cardiff says, "you can see how Tallis was almost thinking sculpturally. Sometimes they're all singing, then sometimes one is singing here, one's singing there. It's a sculptural piece of music."

Forty-Part Motet garnered Canada's \$50,000 (about US \$31,700) Millennium Prize in March, just a few months before she and her husband, George Bures Miller, debuted their work in a collaborative piece at the Venice Biennale. The installation shown there, *The Paradise Institute*, earned widespread acclaim and was described by *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman as "a spectacular mini-movie theater, film and soundtrack [that] moves installation art to a different plane." Now Cardiff has put the finishing touches on a midcareer survey



Janet Cardiff, a Canadian artist now based in Berlin, likes to take listeners on meandering, immersive walks.

at P.S.1, up through the end of next month. It includes *Forty-Part Motet* as well as one of her custom-designed audio walks and other works that rely heavily on sound to provide an experience unlike any previously "seen" in a gallery or museum.

The 44-year-old Canadian has brought a sudden legitimacy to art that uses sound. "My sense of sound may be much more attuned than some other people's," she explains, with an unflinching gaze. "Some people are much more attuned to color, or to smell." Smiling widely, she adds, "I'm not very good at music, but I was good at drawing."

Cardiff grew up on a farm in Brussels, Ontario, and studied art at Queens University before moving to Edmonton to get a master's degree in visual arts at the University of Alberta. It was there that she met Miller, whom she married in 1984; the two discovered a shared fascination for classic black-and-white and science-fiction films, as well as for detective novels by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. A few years later, while working as an artist-in-residence at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Cardiff began developing sound tracks to accompany her exhibitions of prints. "With printmaking I was always trying to create different visual worlds," she says. Adding sound resulted in yet another imaginative layer.

In 1991, Cardiff was exploring a graveyard on the outskirts of Banff. Instead of taking notes, she whispered her observations into a tape recorder. She accidentally hit the rewind button, and then, when she pushed play, found herself fascinated by the medley of noises—her own



For *The Muriel Lake Incident*, 1999, Cardiff and husband George Bures Miller re-created an old theater inside a wooden box. Visitors who put on headphones were plunged into the aural atmosphere of a movie house.

voice, footsteps, rustling leaves, and other ambient sounds. That revelation led to experimentation with the audio facilities at the Banff Centre and eventually to a piece called *Forest Walk*. In this, as in other walks, the listener dons a headset attached to a portable audio player and follows the artist's instructions on a guided tour. In addition to Cardiff's voice—a startlingly dramatic instrument that can shade from a throaty whisper to a panicked cry—the listener hears forest sounds and a narrative about a confrontation with an imaginary elk.

The artist's walks brought her international attention. After producing one for the Louisiana Museum in Denmark in 1996, she was invited to do walks for the Wanås Foundation in Sweden; Skulptur Projekte in Münster, Germany; and the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. Typically, these involve overlapping narratives, music, real-life dialogue taped on location, and recordings of local sounds—sirens and shouts, cars passing, glass breaking on the pavement. For example, the Whitechapel Art Gallery walk, called *The Missing Voice*, takes the listener from an East London library through the winding streets of the Bishopsgate section of London. The narrative that unfolds en route is a noirish detective story that begins with the line, "The killer waited an hour. . . . I'm wearing a red wig now. If he sees me, he'll recognize me." The piece includes snatches of autobiography, whispered instructions, and descriptions of what is seen along the way. "Her narration alternates between real-time observations and memories and other ruminations with a dreamlike fluidity," observes curator John Weber in his catalogue introduction to a 1998 show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Cardiff's work now sells for between \$75,000 and \$150,000 for audio walks and installations. She is represented in New York by Luhring Augustine Gallery.

The degree of collaboration between Cardiff and Miller, who currently make Berlin their home, varies from project to project. "Basically, it starts with whose idea it is," she says. "It's kind of hard to tell because we've lived together for a long time, and our individual works have a lot of input from each other to start with. But it's about authorship. The walks are my work because I wrote the scripts and it was my idea." In their separate ways, Cardiff and Miller are partial to disorienting people: Miller's artworks involve kinetic sculpture and video, projects he describes as "destabilizing the viewer through the motion of the work."

Not surprisingly, Cardiff has drawn inspiration from many sources outside the visual arts: writers like Jorge Luis Borges and Michael Ondaatje, filmmakers like Alain Robbe-Grillet and Ridley Scott. She waxes enthusiastic about a recent show of Giorgio Morandi's work at the



For *Forty-Part Motet*, 2001, 40 speakers blast a 16th-century choral piece in a chapel installation.

Tate but adds that there's "very little strictly visual art that interests me." As she told an interviewer in Canada after receiving the Millennium Prize, "I think as an artist you need to seek inspiration from things other than art because otherwise it becomes a self-serving cycle." ■

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To experience *Wanås Walk*, 1998, near a castle in Wanås, Sweden, visitors don headphones; then Cardiff's voice, bird twitters, and footsteps ring inside their heads.