

Reel Time

McClain Gallery mounts a fascinating, evocative installation by Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher.

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published: January 12, 2012

When you walk into the main room at McClain Gallery, be sure to find the little, square, red button on the wall to your right. It activates the installation. (Don't forget this step. I spent 20 minutes looking at the stuff on the walls and ceiling and idly wondering when the video would start.) Once you press it, the lights dim in the room, ominous sounds play and video is projected large-scale on the back wall.

Courtesy of McClain Gallery



Evocative: an image of an old reel-to-reel tape player, which soon disappears.

Details:

"Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher: Reel to Reel"

Through February 4. McClain - Gallery, 2242 Richmond, 713-520-9988.

Wires and cables meander over the walls and ceiling of McClain, loosely paralleling each other. Aesthetically arranged, they move fluidly, like ink from a brush drawing lines over the gallery's 14-foot walls. But these wires have a function. They connect the elaborate contraptions that *are* the work of Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher, but also generate it.

The collaborative duo has shown smaller works and installations at McClain before, usually in a back gallery. This time they have taken over the whole front room and then some. It's the Houston iteration of "**Reel to Reel**," the ambitious installation they originally created for a 2008 exhibition at the Kemper Museum in Kansas City, Shore and Fisher's first museum show.

Rag-tag constructions incorporating raw plywood boxes, bits of wood, wires, cameras, instrument strings, old records, Plexiglas, audio mixers, transformers, power strips and motors hang on the gallery walls. The artists' work combines Fisher's compositions and inventive sound-generating machines (he has a doctorate in music composition from Northwestern) with Shore's MacGyver-meets-Rube Goldberg, real-time, video-generating constructions. The resulting artwork can be both difficult to show and complicated to explain, but for the viewer, it's a fascinating and highly evocative experience.

The video feels moody; its slightly grainy black-and-white evokes cheap, surveillance-style cameras. The projected opening image shows a sun seemingly rising and setting on a lake viewed through a window, with the audio moving from ominous and anxious to tranquil before morphing into a chase-scene soundtrack. The video shifts to footage of water intercut with clusters of vegetation, which looks like it was shot from a helicopter flying low over the Everglades.

The audio and video are being generated by the constructions/sculptures along the wall. The ominous opening sounds are created by the slowly rotating LPs on wobbly spindles in one wall piece, while the "chase scene" music is created by Fisher's electromechanically played zither/piano contraption on the wall to the left of the screen. And though the whole installation may be computer-controlled, there is no digitally created imagery here. The seemingly aerial Everglades shot is generated by a big piece to the right of the screen. It's a 55-gallon cardboard drum covered with shiny sheet metal. Shore created patterns of terrain in the reflective sheet metal "water" using what looks like model train-set landscaping material. The drum turns in front of a small camera, creating the flyover shot.

In another portion of the video, the camera appears to move down a flight of stairs and into a room. To create this effect, Shore rigged a tiny camera up to travel down miniature stairs and into a dollhouse-like room. Other scenes originate in similar sets, although they're largely concealed. Still, there's always enough of a crack in the structure to let you peer in and catch a glimpse of the interior. The mechanics of it all, however — the stuff most people would hide behind panels and in cases — are on display for everyone to see.

One of the most evocative video scenes is a shot of a stool and table in a wallpapered room. An old reel-to-reel tape player suddenly appears on the table with a pair of huge headphones, and music from some hip but unknown band starts to play. Then the tape player disappears. It's like a memory from someone's youth, of putting on headphones, shutting out the world and escaping into the music. Shore created the reel-to-reel player's appearance and disappearance by using two cameras and two tiny identical rooms, one with a tape player, one without. There's something poignant and nostalgic about it, but there's also something unsettling. Maybe the missing listener isn't gone because he grew up and left home. Maybe something bad happened to him.

For another scene, a small, flat, wooden box containing sand is sandwiched between opaque and clear Plexiglas. Video from the work creates the illusion of a stormy sky; the sand moves across the white Plexiglas surface creating shadows, and it's filmed by a camera underneath. Shore's computer-controlled hardware exactly tilts the box of sand this way and that in real time. Sensors register the movement of the sand, altering Fisher's audio track. The hauntingly lovely storm scene is low- and high-tech magic.

This combination of low-tech and high-tech elements is strangely appealing. The artists are just old enough to have spent their childhood in a largely analog world, but young enough to have embraced and incorporated digital technology into their creations. If you step outside the installation and through a curtained door, you can see the "man behind the curtain," a PC, its screen jammed with information, the Great Oz controlling it all.

Shore and Fisher's work evokes shadow puppets and old radio sound effects, from a time when people used stuff like boxes of cornstarch and coconut shells to create the sound of walking in snow or the clopping of horse hooves. But rather than having some guy creating audio or visual effects and simply recording them, the artists come up with their own automated solutions. It's creative but absurd, like building a robot to operate a hand puppet or play guitar.

The artists were childhood friends, and they work incredibly well together. Their scenes and sounds deftly evoke longing, sadness, hope and humor. That they're the product of the artists' seemingly cold mechanics is part of the wonder of it all. There's also something amusing in the way each audio- and video-generating element is hung along the wall like a painting. But I also wonder what would happen if they massed them all together into one behemoth sculpture.

This is an extremely involved show for a commercial gallery to present, and the McClain Gallery is to be commended for giving these guys the time, space and support to present "Reel to Reel." It's an important show that really has to be experienced to be fully appreciated. I've seen a number of Shore and Fisher's works over the years, and I still can't imagine what is involved in creating, installing and maintaining this stuff. It makes my head hurt to even begin to contemplate it. There have to be days when these guys wish to God they just made static objects that could simply be plunked down in the middle of a room. Lucky for us, they do not.