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Hearing 3-D Art in Flashes

By **RAPHAEL ROSEN**

In the city, in the middle of winter, New Yorkers' interaction with nature can be limited. But at a recent gallery opening, art lovers were able to commune with one of the summer's quintessential creatures: the firefly.

Rhode Island artist China Blue's new sonic installation, "Photini (Biomimetic Fireflies)," is on view at the AC Institute in Chelsea until March 16. Ms. Blue created the fireflies using 3-D printers.



China Blue

The plastic bugs, which are affixed to artificial trees and hedges, have brilliant blue LED lights that are programmed to flash in a pattern based on the blinking patterns of their real, North

American counterparts. Digital beeps and boops also filled the space; they too were based on firefly light patterns.

But why choose fireflies? "Fireflies chose me," said Ms. Blue, who also has created art based on the ambient sounds produced by the Eiffel Tower—creaking metal, murmuring crowds, rustling wind.

She began playing with electronics five years ago and her first firefly creation was made from cellphone parts and plastic from a water bottle. She soon upgraded.

Sound as an art medium has long called to her. "Traditional sculpture didn't answer the questions I had," said Ms. Blue. Sonic installations, on the other hand, were more personal and powerful.

"You can give them a human feel, an emotional content," she said. "You can create a physical relationship with the viewer."

Assistant curator Nicole Bebout liked how the exhibition merged the natural and man-made. "The interesting part is the use of old technology to refer to nature," she said.

The AC Institute is certainly no stranger to experimental art. Founder and director Holly Crawford opened the space in 2003, shortly after completing her doctorate in art history from the University of Essex in England. "I thought it would be interesting to show things that would be hard to sell," she said. "I liked that I could use my Ph.D. in a different way."

As for Ms. Blue, she took a wider view. "My hope is that this exhibition will remind older viewers and inspire younger ones about a form of natural dynamic beauty that can be restored, while at the same time showing the digital alternative that may be all that is left for future generations."