



## arts

# Flash forward

Nature, art and technology intersect in art installation

‘CHINA BLUE: FIREFLY PROJECTS’

Through Sept. 5  
Newport Art Museum,  
76 Bellevue Ave., Newport  
(401) 848-8200

[www.newportartmuseum.org](http://www.newportartmuseum.org)  
BY DANIEL COMBS

The firefly, or *Photinus Lucicrescens*, occupies a romantic place in our collective unconscious. Think of a lake from days long past, when the transition from hot summer day to long, sticky night was illuminated by the ethereal flashes floating silently across the yard.

These romantic evening lights set the mood for more than just on looking humans. The flashes are the primary component to the firefly’s mating ritual. The male fly will send a light signal every

five seconds, and, if she is interested, the female will respond four seconds later. This 5-to-4 pattern creates a slow, undulating rhythm of light, a controlled turbulence in what first seems a serene, indiscriminate lightshow.

Where have the flashes gone? The bioluminescent insects secrete a combination of enzymes in the lower abdomen, which, when released in the presence of oxygen, creates light. But that light isn’t very powerful, and in populated areas with brightly glowing urban centers, the male’s attempt to flash his way towards mating are stymied by the artificial lights on our electric grid.



‘Firefly Cloud II.’ A photograph from a series documents a cluster of LEDs programmed to blink like the North American firefly and suspended from a weather balloon escorted around a neighborhood on a windy day.

“Unfortunately the loss of fireflies is not something we measure significantly in our culture,” the artist China Blue laments.

This mesmerizing dance of light, which, she posits, registers in our society as

“interesting” rather than “important,” is fading. Her current one-woman show at the Newport Art Museum attempts to draw attention to the loss.

“This particular exhibit is about the fragility of our ecosystems,” China Blue said of her new installation, “Firefly Projects,” which opened Saturday, June 4, at the Newport Art Museum. The Warwick-based artist has taken the simple yet elegant dance of the firefly and, with all the necessary trappings (the recycled found materials of her “Firefly 2.0 Artbot,” the nostalgic recreation of a rural beauty within an urban setting in her “Firefly Cloud”), used the pretext of environmental art to explore a far greater question about the intersection of science, art and technology.

The centerpieces of her project are the twin, 7½-foot “trees” positioned in the middle of the room. These black, monolithic poles are festooned with dozens of thin wooden branches, on top of which sit small, black metal flies, each with a blue LED attached to its abdomen.

In the circuitry running through the tree lies an algorithm governing the precise timing of each LED, based on the natural 5-to-4

pattern found in the firefly's mating ritual. Accompanying these blinking blue lights are low, ambient tones, corresponding to the lighting of a male or female fly. These sonic harmonies emphasize the visual pattern to create a hypnotic aesthetic experience that manages to achieve a tranquil electronic beauty, and, more importantly, highlight an astounding truth about art.

The precision with which China Blue is able to replicate a naturally imprecise phenomenon is unsettling. While the light and sound show is beautiful in their stately pace and impressive in scale, they mark a transition between art and the natural world. Art in its most fundamental form is an attempt at representation. Painters depicted people and landscapes so that their beauty or character could be captured and forever gazed upon. As technology has progressed, so has the artist's ability to depict nature, until the work is no longer a representation, but a commentary on our world, whether the subject be biological, sociological or personal.

China Blue's project is a commentary on that commentary, devoutly

intellectual through its cool, narcotic pacing.

The effect is simultaneously calming and disconcerting. What you see and hear can only be described as serene. The spindly branches cast blue-backed shadows upon the walls as the LEDs flash intermittently, creating an enveloping bubble within the entirety of the dark room. Even with your back turned to the flies on the trees, you see them flashing all around you. Yet for all these soothing sights and sounds, it is impossible to leave the room without confronting some very basic questions about what it means to live at the intersection of technology and nature. Can natural beauty be quantified? When does mimicry segue into replacement?

"The final effect I wasn't interested in controlling," China Blue says contentedly. "The psycho-emotional results are a nice component that I'm not intuitively trying to design."

"Nature has its own wonderful strengths," she added with a wry smile.