



Newport Art Museum CURATOR'S FORWARD

Nancy Whipple Grinnell

“Firefly Projects” is an exhibition that may have many Newport Art Museum members asking questions. Why is this art? What does it mean? How is it made? Part of the Museum’s mission is to challenge our thinking about contemporary art and make us contemplate “The shock of the new,” to quote the title of the enlightening book by Robert Hughes. Building upon the landscape explored by giant twentieth century art movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism and Environmental Art, and “anti-art” philosophies such as Fluxus, twenty-first century artists are increasingly blurring the boundaries between art, science and nature.

China Blue is one of these artists. She defines her art as biomimetic, or relating to a field of science in which we look at

materials found in nature and try to mimic them in our manmade designs. “Firefly Projects” continues the body of work shown recently at the University of Rhode Island, called “Seventh Kingdom,” in which China Blue integrates sound and sculpture with electronics, and fabricates with recycled materials. In her words, she is creating “new biological forms from the wastes of the older ones,” forms that she envisions as a new class of organism, after the taxonomic kingdoms: animal, plant, fungus, protis, archaea and bacteria. This blending of art and science in China Blue’s work benefits from “intermedia,” or the intersection of media including found objects, data sonfication, visualization, electronics and digitalization.

Robotic art is integral to Fly 2.0, presumably a member of this Seventh Kingdom. BEAM (biology, electronics, aesthetics and mechanics) technology, a style of robotics that uses analogue circuits (rather than digital) is the technological impetus that makes Fly 2.0 move and “skitter,” but the sound, the color, the lights, the materials that give life to the sculpture are intended to evoke memories of actual fireflies that were such a miraculous part of nature in my childhood and probably many others. In such a way, China Blue’s sculpture is of a conceptual nature, because it invites a reaction dependent on the brain’s impulse.

Repurposing is important to China Blue’s artistic process. She constructs her sculptures from materials that have become obsolete or discarded from use in manufacturing; selected

elements from the “Seventh Kingdom” work includes discarded dryer vent hose, plumbing pipes and guitar strings. Firefly Tree is made from recycled power cables and wooden dowels as well as speakers and LEDs, which emulate the optical and aural patterns created by fireflies signaling each other in nature, looking for mates. Once again, the sculpture transcends its materials to recreate the magical delights of seeing fireflies in the darkness.

Firefly Cloud is an interactive piece, a cluster of blinking LEDs that may be carried and moved in a night-time environment or darkened gallery. It is programmed with flashing light patterns that imitate the male *Photinus*, a genus of firefly that emits unique signals in its lust for females—who may or may not flash a response. The resulting visual array, made more beautiful by a breeze, is truly a metaphor for fireflies— the actual ones who seem to be less prevalent due to the urban sprawl and light pollution that reduces their habitat.

To some, China Blue’s fascinating creatures may seem more like science fiction than science and art. In fact, the sound patterns and bioluminescence that she has recreated in “Firefly Projects” illustrates China Blue’s passion and concern for our fragile ecological system. Although she characterizes her work as informed with DIY (Do-it-yourself) aesthetics, she exhibits an interdisciplinary sophistication that is very impressive.

As founder of The Engine Institute, a non-profit whose purpose is “to support artistic exploration at the frontiers of science and foster innovations to beneficially impact society and culture,” China Blue’s thought-provoking, visually stimulating art is a symbol for the postmodern age. The Newport Art Museum is very pleased to host “