

Bmore Art

Thoughtful Beauty: The Ninth Sondheim Finalists Exhibition

June 25, 2014

By Marcus Civin

### **Marcus Civin on Shannon Collis**

University of Maryland Professor Shannon Collis has got me thinking about sound. The vast majority of sound is wasted; it collides with unconcerned ears. The full spectrum of sound is completely surprising; it does not resemble popular music or conventional language, but oscillates from every movement of every device and from delicate anklets and inside the walls between apartments. Sound is trucks flooring it, and sound is an infinite series of pater, ever-scrolling uninterrupted mini-gestures. Sound is millivolts, and sound is an epic double bass, long athletic fingers gliding endlessly and almost imperceptibly catching cool strings.

For *Iterations* [2014] Collis inks up long film scrolls. The scrolls are transparent lyric skins, crisp scores of marks that look like black blocks, agitated cut strings of triangles, or grids of dots. Collis motorizes and lights-up these scrolls of abstractions; they are rolling continuously up and around. If I understand correctly, the variation of the abstractions operate somewhat like needle grooves in a vinyl record or like the hole-punches in the paper rolls that act as sheet music, that govern player pianos. Digital light sensors read how light travels around Collis' abstract marks and these sensors trigger quick subtle electronic taps on taut wires. For *Frequencies* [2012] Collis captures tough black particles and makes them dance in clean white frames on top of speaker vibrations. The particles might scatter, then they might form fingerprint patterns, or stage any number of refusals to make a solid picture. Collis' abstractions are calculating abstractions, capable abstractions. They work; they are intelligent and faithful.

Collis builds sculptures in order to draw sound and to position sound to make it draw. She is a machine-maker without any particular attachment to color, figure, narrative, or social reference. She is quiet and disciplined, but I think somehow Collis could invest in content. In this way, she could open her laboratory screen-door a little more and let us in. There is great joy for me in discovering these experiments. I'm watching and listening. Realizing hints of their science is like the never-to-be-repeated delight of my first driving lesson—making a car go, translating much energy by simply releasing the break. It might increase the appeal and importance of these experiments if Collis could test cultural ideas in addition to testing sound and its relationship to visual form. Or she could otherwise inject just a hint of a reference to socially distinct forms or reveal a peculiar intimacy.

### **Marcus Civin on Kyle Tata**

Kyle Tata, an Instructor at The Baltimore School for the Arts, exhibits a series of exquisite photographs that span a range of approaches, from geometric still life, to grainy images of mysterious origin, to photograms (photographic images made without cameras). The wall text that accompanies the group of pictures proposes that we read them in part as a loose exploration of the personal relationship between formidable Modernist architects Ludwig Mies van der Rohe [1886-1969] and Phillip Johnson [1906-2005]. Tata pays gleeful homage to Mies and Johnson. He also tries to run after these men, to tease them, and perhaps bring them down to size, making them artists like other artists, competitors, colleagues. The problem with this historically-referential approach to object-making is that it is easy to get wrapped up in the reference and forget what's right in front of you.

*Chicago, 1942* [2014], a black-and-white inkjet print, shows the blurry back of an older man, hunched slightly but still vigorous-looking. I assume he just turned. He wears a thick suit jacket. It must be a Christmas party; I think I see ornaments. I can almost hear loud jazz music and smokers cooing by the big French doors. *A Broken Shot Glass for Mies* [2014] is another black-

and-white inkjet print showing two nails and shards of the shot glass pressed up against the picture plane. In the photograph, the nails are longer than my head. That shot glass would hold a bucket of alcohol.

I am no expert on the now-buried rivalries, indiscretions, transgressions, and passions of the two Modernist architects Tata references. Their many buildings are muscled wallops of marble, steel, and so much glass that they can reveal as much as they contain. The two architects worked together closely. When they worked independently, they still ended up with a lot in common. Johnson's Glass House in New Cannan, Connecticut [1949], for instance, and Mies' Farnsworth House [1951] in Plano, Illinois, are close cousins—open-plan glowing jewel box homes in dramatic natural settings with long horizontal slabs sandwiching-in walls of windows.

By emphasizing early photographic techniques and architectural photography, Tata wants to propel us back to the heady boundary-defying artistic milieu that informed these men early on—an environment where photography could be every bit as abstract as painting, and many artists and designers were working across media, deeply concerned with re-organizing space to elevate human experience. The cyanotype is an old-school photographic developing process that produces a blueprint that appears otherworldly. Tata's gorgeous cyanotypes feel delicate, pleurably immeasurable, and undefined, made by placing grates down on photosensitized canvas and exposing the canvas to light. The resulting blue compositions evoke sections from elevations for skyscrapers, ghostly checkered handkerchiefs folded in suit pockets, and cracked bathroom floor tile.

Tata's project suggests a hazy-boozy fictionalized account of hidden intimacies between two bold, austere aesthetes. Strangely, even considering Tata's more vague and poetic photographs, I can nudge my mind to imagine squabbles, coarse gaffs, or revelatory moments on-the-job by a pile of offcuts or between puddles in the alley behind a corporate parking garage. But perhaps I am going too far, associating too much. The link from Tata to Mies and Johnson is tenuous. It provides a good story to run wild with, but without explanation, any reading of this connection would be very difficult to pick up and puzzle through. In the end, one wonders what it is about the Modernist story that draws Tata in. It may be worth a romp with rough overblown monuments men, but what is meaningful and relevant from what we discover there?