

# Plenty of light and sound, but little vision in 'Lumiere'

## Only a little illumination sparks spectacle of an exhibit

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | March 21, 2004

You and a companion stand in the low-ceilinged hallway of a well-maintained Colonial house. Instead of family photos, black glass hangs in the picture frames on the wall, capturing your pale reflection. Suddenly, a wraith appears in the dark window at the end of the hall. You gasp audibly. Another wraith appears. Your companion screams. The ghosts move; they look eerily like you. Then the walls moan earsplitting, angry cries. That's when you run for your lives. Or, if you're standing in the middle of Michael Mittelman's "Hallway" installation, part of the "Son et Lumiere" exhibit at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, you recognize that this is art, and although it might be scary, it's probably safe -- and even fun.

Bill Arning, the List Center's curator, has put together a light-and-sound spectacle of an exhibition. (The title refers to a postwar entertainment that illuminated historic buildings and monuments and synchronized the lights with a soundtrack.) Unfortunately, it's a tall order for any artist to blend the big-top bravado of spectacle with the meaty content of good art. Of the six installations in "Son et Lumiere," two pull off that challenge superbly, two fall short, and two seem not even to fit into the exhibition. Visual artists have been crossing over into film and video for years now. Arning aims to take the viewers out of the audience and put them in the middle of the action, immersing them in aural and visual experiences. Light, color, and sound affect the limbic system, the brain's processor of emotion. Consequently, artists who use these potent media paint with a broad brush. Mittelman's "Hallway" is an example: He leads his viewers right into a haunted house and uses their own movement and sound (recorded by cameras and microphones) to scare them out of their wits. It's clever, smartly executed, and a gas to interact with, but no deeper than "The Amityville Horror."

In contrast, "Listening Post," put together by sound designer Ben Rubin and statistician Mark Hansen and previously exhibited in 2002 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, merges the visual and sonic elements elegantly with a rushing river of content. Hansen and Rubin continuously tap into thousands of online chat rooms, pulling bits of text into a great wave that breaks over a curtain of 231 miniature screens. Electronic music plays; a male voice with British inflections recites some of the text. In one recent sequence, the screens pulled

up sentences pairing "I love" with "the dog on `Frasier,' " "snoop," "milosophical (sic) political women." For all its electronic wizardry, "Listening Post" proves a tender chorus of humanity, spiced by moments of anger, lewdness, and hate. It's bold, capacious, and entrancing. Ann Lislegaard's "Corner Piece -- The Space Between Us" draws the viewer into a cinematic narrative with little more for visual effect than a flickering light. It's a minimalist piece: A white room in which two freestanding walls form a corner. One woman's voice whispers in two interweaving audio tracks; light behind the corner rises and falls with the words on one track. "She corners me. I can see behind the wall. She, me, she, me," the voices whisper from speakers at the ends of each wall, setting up a protagonist and a double, or an ego and an alter ego, joined at the center just like the two walls forming the corner. "Corner Piece" is more haunting and suggestive than "Hallway." The voices, the narrative, the hushed light, the walls obscuring that light, and the sterility of the white box -- each element sets up its own strand of suspense; the whole is hard to walk away from.

An even emptier gallery sets the stage for Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's "Traffic Patterns." A back-lighted ceiling shifts colors from green to yellow to red, synchronized, we are told, with a traffic light in San Juan. The minimalist conceptual trope of an empty gallery dates back to Yves Klein in the 1950s, and Martin Creed made a stir in 2001 when he won Britain's Turner Prize for his version. Creed's was titled "The Lights Going On and Off," and "Traffic Patterns" (dated 1999-2003) reads like a rip-off of that, with a sociopolitical twist referring to the power dynamic between the United States and its tiny commonwealth that undermines an otherwise minimalist agenda.

Local artists Bruce Bemis and Jessica Rylan have the smallest pieces in the show; rather than go for the jugular, they take a more intellectual approach. In the past, Bemis has effectively used old, amateur 16mm films to stir up nostalgia and the now half-century-old sense of wonder at the new technology of home movies. In his "Bipolar Radiance," a metal contraption holding suspended projectors and metal globes obscures the projected twin images of a twirling Ice Capades skater. In another context, the whir and click of the projectors, their gawky stand, and the dizziness of the images might captivate, but here, amid the grandeur and nuanced mechanics of the 21st-century installations, "Bipolar Radiance" is a poor cousin.

The same is true of Rylan's "The Voice of the Theatre," which has no light show, and for audio merely the crackle and buzz of a decades-old sound system. The viewer steps between thick, red curtains, as if entering an old movie palace, only

to find three dusty speakers and some synthesizers. Like Bemis's piece, Rylan's is powered by nostalgia -- in her case, an affinity for early electronic compositions. The exhibition's title nods some 50 years back to one progenitor of this kind of art. It's certainly important to look back at the sources of this cinematic trend, as Bemis and Rylan do. But "Son et Lumiere" promises an immersion experience, intentionally pushing the viewers' buttons. Once committed to that road, it's jarring and disappointing to scale back from the sheer impact of the present to examine the past.