

# On sculpture: When less is more

## Artist and composer collaborate in sight and sound

By Dennis Fawcett

**T**HE concept of the installation, creating temporary environments specific to an exhibition site, is one of the newer modes of artistic expression.

Granted, works have always been composed with specific sites in mind, but such endeavors — commissioned sculptures, for instance — are usually intended to be permanent. Two exhibitions in New Haven show artists grappling with the same concerns that an artist working on a permanent commission would consider — exhibition space, light, formal integration, audience interaction — but arriving at solutions that are ultimately bound by being temporary.

While both exhibitions can be considered minimalist, "Environmental Collaboration" at the Creative Arts Workshop will seem positively rococo to those who see it after seeing Fred Sandback's work at the Yale Art Gallery (see review on this page). Here the work is natural, fluid, and ethereal rather than geometric,

linear, and abstract. (Fight the culturally ingrained aesthetic; these descriptions are not value judgements.)

The CAW exhibition is essentially one work integrated into the workshop's two-story gallery. But the work has two components, one aural and the other sculptural. It is also the product of a collaborative effort between two artists, sculptor Bill Gilbert and composer Landon Rose.

Although Gilbert now lives near Santa Fe, N.M., and Rose is living in Boston (he'll enter the graduate music program at Wesleyan in the fall), the two were raised in the New Haven area and went to grammar school together. This is their first collaboration.

"We got to talking after I'd done an installation at the Wadsworth," said Gilbert at the show's opening. "We realized that the things we're thinking about in our work are pretty similar, even though the disciplines are very different."

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# Collaboration: Artist and composer join forces

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Once the show's date was set, Gilbert and Rose met in New Mexico to begin planning the work, considering possibilities in both the sounds and the physical materials they would bring to New Haven.

"We came with a number of possible solutions, knowing we would have to make our final selections when we started working in the space," Rose said.

Indeed the first thing that confronted the artists when they got to the space was what was outside the gallery. Realizing that the street, building, and construction work going on outside would be foreign to any work they envisioned, they curtailed the windows.

"We tried a number of different materials, and even more ways of keeping the stuff up," Gilbert said. "The windows get incredibly hot, and melted all the adhesives we tried at first."

The final solution was brown craft paper in wide, floor-to-ceiling strips. This is also the aspect of the show that confronts the viewer first, even before entering the building. From the outside, it looks as though CAW must be undergoing renovations, as though there can't be a show in the gallery. Don't be fooled.

Inside, the gallery is made much more intimate and serene by the change. The light filtering through the paper gives a soft, naturalistic tone to the space. And the brown light is appropriate, too, in light of the materials the artists eventually settled on — pale, graceful aspen branches peeled of their bark; shrub brush; and sounds of birds, water, wind, thunder and silence. During the week preceding the

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show's opening, Gilbert and Rose met daily to work in the space. In the mornings, they conducted a workshop designed to acquaint the small group of participants with the collaborative process, discussing the options the artists were pursuing and the concerns they hoped to address, and preparing the materials.

Initially, the materials were simply what the artists were attracted to — pulsing and reverberating sounds, plants from the New Mexican mountains. And while they see the final work as essentially non-literal, it is clearly a Western environment that one enters.

The aspen branches are hung on nylon thread from the ceilings of the various levels of the space. In the small alcove opposite the windows, a small configuration hangs beneath a spotlight. In the large two-story space, a larger group diffuses gently outward from three tall, vertical branches — the only pieces in the work that touch the floor. Upstairs hang more areas of aspen that stretch cloudlike overhead.

The sound nominally emanates from speakers hidden in scrub brush. But the sound is made more ambient by the sparsely filled

room and by being directed so that the sound reflects out from the walls. This is achieved most strikingly in the stairwell, where a small unit plays the sound of falling water, so that it seems to be coursing down the steps.

In the main exhibition spaces, the sounds are constantly changing — now birds fluting, now water murmuring, now wind whispering. Periodic silences separate the long rises and falls in the sound level. The cycle repeats every 90 minutes, and once in that time there is a short but violent storm.

"I wanted something that was the opposite of the sound-bite syndrome we're growing used to, where snatches of sound information are all we get," Rose said. "I see the piece as serialism — in which sections of sound repeat over and over — taken to an extreme. Then, in conjunction with Bill's work, I saw it as counterpoint in 3-D."

The juxtapositions and convergences of visual and aural sensations are elegantly conceived. When the wind sounds are taking place, the aspen sculptures seem to take on a completely different set of characteristics than when the bird sounds are present. If one is around for the brief and violent

crescendo, one may realize it as the counterpart to the dramatic vertical element in the aspen. To complement the spacial voids, there are silences (at least within the work).

In one respect, the work's concept is undercut by its realization. Just as the speakers are camouflaged by piles of brush, the physical quality of the sound is muffled, almost a featureless blur in places. Whether because of poor speakers or over-manipulated sound material, it's a problem.

On the other hand, the presence of the speaker mounds provides a nice, weighty ballast to the materials floating above. Furthermore, they are well-placed to take advantage of the gallery spatially and acoustically. As Gilbert put it, "One of the best things about the collaboration here was that in every case the visual solutions were the same as the sonic ones."

This is the paradigm for the viewer, too. Each change in sonic or physical orientation reveals some new discovery about the interplay between sculpture and sound. Knowing that some of those connections may never be made is fascinating to consider.

When viewing a painting, it's all there to see, assuming one could know everything there was to look for. At CAW, "Environmental Collaboration" is constantly unfolding something new. If one stays for one set of sounds and misses another, it's possible to return to collaborate in a completely different environment.

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