

Seattle: Amie McNeel, Mark Zirpel, and Sam Stubblefield – MadArt
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Mad Art Studio sponsors artists to imagine and create work in a massive 4000 square foot with 23 foot ceilings. Founder Allison Milliman wants to demystify the process of creating art and bring it into the community. The artists work in full view of the street through large sliding glass doors that encourage obsessed techies (this is the Amazon zone of Seattle), and other members of the public, to observe or participate in the artistic process.

Never has the MadArt mission been more realized than in the “Portfolio of Possibilities,” a collaboration of Amie McNeel, Mark Zirpel (both multimedia sculptors) and Sam Stubblefield (technology architect). Amie McNeel has a background in Marine science and Mark Zirpel is fascinated by celestial science and astronomy. Stubblefield connects us to these realms through computer programs that tap into various surprising locations in cyberspace.

The artists describe “Portfolio of Possibilities,” as revealing phenomena such as motion, gravity, sound, resonance, momentum, rotation, currents, and turbulence. To do that, they experimented with objects such as old buoys, ropes, inner tubes, anvils, propellers, to make them shake, glow, rotate, and sing in playful disharmony. They blew up the scale of small tools, such as calipers and magnets. They disrupted expectations at every opportunity. For six months, they dreamed, played, failed, discarded and rethought.

Outside the gallery, an oddball mound of intertwined inner tubes, programmed to connect to a bus app, vibrated when a streetcar approached the stop. Just inside the entrance a thick rope unwound itself as it rose up, then mysteriously descended into an unruly pile on the floor. Unexpected movements of familiar materials characterized the entire exhibition. Nothing was left as a traditional sculpture to simply view. Instead, as the pieces moved, as we moved, as laser lights flashed, shadows appeared and disappeared, we were constantly caught off guard.

A weather balloon whimsically inflated according to when the international space station passed over particular locations. Near the end of the show, someone accidentally popped it, it hung inert, like a giant used condom. The artists embraced the deflation and did not replace the balloon.

Rocking an oversized magnet back and forth triggered the eerie sound of a humpbacked whale. Audio signals, the last mating call of the Kaua’i ‘ō’ō, an extinct bird from Hawai’i, paired with NASA’s Voyager 1 robotic probe, slowly turned a suspended oil pipeline cap. A giant caliper strung with a single wire, played a note as a propeller rotated, sending a mechanical device to pluck the single string. When we entered a windowless room with no way out (sensory deprivation chamber), we heard the sound of our own beating heart. A laser reflected off a water-filled oversized glass fishing lure, creating light patterns that evoked anything from brain patterns to bone marrow.

A giant top suspended from the ceiling, spiraled at a crazy angle as it cast mesmerizing shadows on the walls. Made of steel band tracks that held ball bearings, the top was triggered by wave height data from NOAA; as the balls rolled around and around, they created a rhythmic sound like ocean waves breaking on the shore.

Glowing on a large screen in the depths of the chaos, green laser patterns translated the sound of a ringing bell (another oil pipeline cap) by means of transducers (a way to convert a physical quality into electrical impulses) in a hidden pool of water.

As the artists improvised, dynamic representations of invisible forces emerged. They became like musicians conducting new instruments that played themselves, animated by digital data from cyberspace. They connected to our bodies, our lives, our movements, and our feelings. We felt surprise, exhilaration, anxiety, and joy amidst these mysterious, pulsing, glowing objects that conversed with one another and with us. But, finally, as demonstrations of the beautiful complexity and fragility of the planet we live on “Portfolio of Possibilities,” became a cautionary tale. If we are to have a future, we must acknowledge and respect these powerful forces.