
Evocative landscape of sonic warfare

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One weekend at the end of every summer, my family and I find ourselves under attack. It happens right where we live, in an otherwise peaceful neighborhood on the North Side of Chicago.

Hiding in our apartment with the doors locked doesn't help. The assault is bodily and brutal, ghostly in its near invisibility and totally inescapable.

I refer, of course, to the Chicago Air and Water Show, which took place a few weeks ago, to the delight of thousands of spectators. As usual, the Navy and Army put on an event of dashing speeds and daring feats, showing off such fine aircraft as the UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter and the F-18 Super Hornet.

You're thinking: Whatever, hippie peacenik art chick. First off, this is one of the most beloved events of the season. Second, nobody believes in ghosts. And third, it's entertainment, not warfare.

Leaving aside the grotesque paradox that one person's fun can be another person's torture, let's focus on the potential of sound as weapon. Better yet, rather than trying to remember the effect of those jets swooping high over the Chicago skyline, spend some time in artist Deborah Stratman's masterfully abstract, evocative sculpture and sound installation at the College of DuPage's Gahlberg Gallery in Glen Ellyn.

Stratman's "Tactical Uses of a Belief in the Unseen" offers a sophisticated space in which to experience and contemplate sonic warfare. The built structure, carpeted with hauntingly anemic shades of cheap acrylic carpeting, coaxes the body up its angular, mountainous surface. Faceted and sharp, abstract and vaguely neutral, it conjures mysterious visions of sand dunes and pyramids, of a computer-generated model of the desert that the army might use for training soldiers about to be shipped off to fight in the Middle East. The Gahlberg's modernist ceiling grid, almost touchable when standing at the apex of Stratman's sculpture, makes each visitor a soldier-in-training on the unmappable desert below.

The sound compositions, created in collaboration with musician Jen Wang, attack while you are perched on the climbable carpeted wastelands. At once subtle and booming, strafing and penetrating, they tackle the body and mind in eerie, perplexing ways, as only the invisible can.

Underneath pounds bone-penetrating subfrequency bass, the earth about to explode from unknown causes below. Above shoots sharp, ear-piercing noise, bombs about to be dropped from an unseen enemy in the sky.

An entire history of militaristic precedents exists for this, as Stratman reveals in a series of elegant, spare drawings printed in the free pamphlet that accompanies the exhibition. Regrettably these aren't on view in the gallery itself, though they would have made the installation's critical context far more accessible.

In these sketches, the abstract forms and sounds that fill the gallery gain a cruel specificity, one linked to aural blitzes from the sixth century B.C., up through the German Renaissance to the present.

Though the drawings at first seem to depict a miscellany of 20th century artworks, their titles (together with the catalog text) carry the hard data that twist them into something more nefarious. A surrealist target diagrams how Han Chinese generals flew musical kites over enemy territory under cover of darkness, scaring off their attackers with sounds taken to be the warnings of angry gods. A geometric abstraction pictures the sonic boom of a fighter jet, like the kind used by the Israeli army night after night in 2005, when it flew planes terrifyingly low over the densely populated Gaza Strip. Two simple minimalist concavities are in fact parabolic structures deployed to monitor enemy planes during World War I. A postmodern collage of a chopper carrying a pyramid illustrates the Curdler, a technique used by American battalions in Vietnam, who blasted the simulated cries of local ancestral spirits out of helicopter-mounted loudspeakers with messages for the Vietcong.

Perhaps most surprising for a contemporary audience is the militaristic reliance on conjuring noisy ghosts. Who even knew ghosts made noise? But even those techniques that don't — hard to imagine the efficacy of spectral strafing in Gaza today — rely on the threat of the invisible. What you can't see might be the thing that harms you the most.

Hence the delayed but vital transparency of the speakers in Stratman's installation. Her aural compositions are not the sounds of ghosts or of the unseen enemy, though they may seem to be at first. Look further, and the sources of those sounds reveal themselves: a rotating directional speaker hangs from the ceiling, visible for all to see while it rakes visitors' ears with the shrapnel of sirens and blades and motors, or at least instruments that simulate those noises. Powerful subwoofers sit beneath the plywood and 2-by-4 floor sculpture, observable thanks to a glass wall which runs the length of the gallery.

"Tactical Uses of a Belief in the Unseen" ultimately allows itself to be seen. That's one of the privileges of an art space, the chance to develop a thoughtful awareness about what is happening to you. Stratman takes it one crucial step further when the noises suddenly pause and the gallery goes silent. Then, and only then, can you truly realize how profoundly the sounds have been affecting you.

"Deborah Stratman: Tactical Uses of a Belief in the Unseen" runs through Oct. 16 at the Gahlberg Gallery, College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, 630-942-2321, cod.edu/gallery.

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