

At Branch Gallery, essays on spaces and sounds May 18, 2008

Ann Toebbe's paintings of gray churches, dotted with brilliant color, and Nadine Robinson's surround sound are the visual and aural experiences of the new show at Branch Gallery.

Toebbe presents four churches -- St. John the Evangelical, St. Lawrence, St. Mary Magdalene and St. Augustine -- to us as gray and black ground plans with splashes of vivid color coming from stained glass windows that fill the church walls. The gallery notes tell us that Toebbe has grown away from the Catholic church of her childhood and these images reflect her memories that have grayed with age but return unexpectedly in the form of brilliantly lit windows.

Her show also includes three small paintings of room interiors, a kitchen, a bedroom and a TV room. The influence of cubism and German expressionism immediately comes to mind. Our view is from above; jagged edges replace rounded ones and the dark hues of green, red and black give these paintings an old-fashioned edge. Each canvas is full of patterns, from the rugs to the counterpanes to the stained glass windows that fill each room.

The gallery notes offer us the theme of memories and, with that mental set, it is easy to find our own moments of nostalgia. The huge churches are intimidating, yet the windows with their Christian stories counter the fear. Not so the domestic interiors: If anything, they are frighteningly claustrophobic.

Again the notes suggest that Toebbe's churches reflect in visual form how she has come to terms with her "adult atheism." The spaces of her home, with their spiky shapes and thick color suggest a kaleidoscopic view, something we can all relate to.

These compositions have no people, but their presence is everywhere. The artist's hands are in the altar paintings and sculptures and in the shapes and colors of the windows. We feel the energy of the carpenters, bricklayers and electricians who built the churches and the people who filled the seats. It is the same in the interiors: A pair of shoes lies on the floor, fresh flowers are in the vases and the kitchen counter has dishes drying in a rack.

Her churches are grand, places to evoke awe while joy coupled with fear are close at hand. Home, however, is more complicated. Each of us has memories of home, wrapped in layers that deal with safety, maybe anger, perhaps sadness and, hopefully, lots of laughter.

I like Toebbe's paintings. She is a finished artist with great technical skill and she is so much more. Although her canvases seem straightforward, they immediately move the visitor into a lifetime of personal memories. This kind of connection is what every artist works toward; and when it happens, the artist and the viewer share a rare artistic moment.

According to the gallery notes, Robinson's art explores popular culture through visual expression and the sounds of everyday music. This installation "employs a soundtrack that combines recordings of Pentecostal glossolalia [speaking in tongues] with that of unrestrained laughter." The long, narrow space is lit by blue fluorescent lights with six white speakers arranged on the wall in pyramidal formation.

As visitors move around the space, the sound bombards them, but the only thing that is clear is the frenetic laughing.

Surround sound is a legitimate art form. It moved from Muzak in elevators to formal art spaces, but probably first became an idea to deal with when John Cage, in a 1952 concert, offered the sound of silence in his composition titled, "4 minutes 33 seconds." At that event, Cage sat before his piano with his hands in his lap for the 4 minutes and 33 seconds; the restlessness of the audience, the rattling of programs, the nervous coughing and low whispers became the music and, from then on, everyday sounds, recorded, amplified and cut and pasted became usable tools for art installations.

While sound can be a formal art element, it does not have universal appeal and Raleigh's state employees can attest to that. In 1993, Bill Fontana, internationally famous for his sound environments installed "Spiraling Sound Axis," into the rotunda of Raleigh's State Revenue Building. The sound sculpture included a thunderstorm in Wilmington, a fiddler's convention in Mount Airy, waves crashing at the coast and birds, frogs and geese in the swamps and the forests. Its amplifiers and speakers were hidden throughout the rotunda and the piece was meant to be a welcoming experience for visitors and employees. The workers in the building hated it. Finally, the artist and the employees carved out a compromise where the sounds were confined to the vestibule, to be heard for only two hours a day. (I have yet to hear it.)

Robinson's installation is part of the 20th century tradition that art is everywhere, but when it gets in your face, it can evoke righteous anger, and that is not what any artist wants. Such art makes a statement and then disappears; like sound itself, it is meant to be an ephemeral moment in time.

If you go ... "Ann Toebbe: Churches"; "Nadine Robinson, Das Hochzeitshaus," Branch Gallery, 401-C Foster St., through June 7. Gallery hours are Wednesday-Saturday, noon to 6 p.m. For more information, call (919) 918-1116.

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