

sculpture

NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

China Blue

Newport Art Museum

Over the last 10 years, sound has established itself on solid footing, solid enough to be considered seriously by museums and critics as another form of sculpture. During this same period, China Blue, a fore-runner in the so-called contemporary sound art movement, began to think about scientifically mining this territory in the most original and unorthodox ways.

After beginning as a painter, China Blue realized that creating with the implied structure of energy in space, the geography of sound, was her true calling. Using recording devices, she began to study sounds above and below the frequencies detectable by the human ear.

Works capturing the Eiffel Tower's vibrations (2007) and the under water sounds pervading Venice's canals during *aqua alta* – exhibited at OPEN XI on the Lido in 2008 – brought her to international attention and set the stage for two grants from NASA, as well as a 2012

New Genres grant from the Rhode Island State Council of the Arts. China Blue continues to study and sample acoustic phenomena. In 2009, she recorded the sounds of NASA's Vertical Gun, a device that tests hypervelocity impacts. In 2011, she recorded sounds heard in the atmosphere from a weather balloon, using microphones embedded in an artificial head. Recently, she has widened her purview to include the biometric. In *Hygro Rhizome* (2010), a biomimetic work first exhibited at the University of Rhode Island, she constructed a group of six interconnected, root-like structures, each with electronics that monitor the water level in a beaker. As long as there was water, the rhizomes, remain illuminated. "Firefly Projects," China Blue's most comprehensive and complex exhibition to date, drew inspiration from the iconic summertime insects. The biometric fireflies in the sculptural works call attention to dwindling firefly populations in the real world, where they are threatened by light pollution and urban sprawl. Housed in a small,

darkened gallery, the installation became an otherworldly experience of eerie, data-driven sounds, twinkling blue lights, and electrifying photographs. The nighttime photographs collected in *Firefly Cloud* depicted clusters of wind-blown LEDs programmed with flashing light patterns that imitate the signals emitted by fireflies in their quest for a mate. *Firefly Book*, its spine illuminated by 3D printed fireflies, terminating in blinking LEDs, added more drama, but two 7.5 foot trees, their wooden branches blanketed with flashing fireflies, command pride of place in the show. The work was constructed from recycled power cables, wooden dowels, 3D printed fireflies, LEDs, and speakers. The blinking lights and soothing audio both programmed to mimic the rhythmic mating call of the North American firefly, transported viewers back to nostalgic childhood days of collecting fireflies in a jar.

-Edward Rubin

