

Hairpin Arts Center: Unpredictable show challenges with subtlety

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I very nearly missed seeing one of the most beautiful installations of the year.

This despite the fact that Paola Cabal's "Analemma" fills two of the only walls in the Hairpin Arts Center, a newish multiuse space located on the second floor of a historic building whose ample windows overlook the Diversey- Milwaukee-Kimball avenues intersection in Logan Square. Cabal spent a quarter of a year recording the traces left on these walls by the passing sun, eventually fixing their diffuse delicacy in place via meticulously applied layers of paint just a few shades lighter than the walls themselves.

My almost oversight is less about a failure to look carefully than assumptions regarding what is permanent and what is ephemeral, what is empty and what is full. Such expectations are repeatedly overturned by "The Presence of Absence," a remarkable group exhibition curated by Dave and Debra Tolchinsky and including work by a refreshingly unpredictable handful of emerging and established local artists, Cabal among them. The others are Robert Chase Heishman with Brendan Meara, Melika Bass, Christopher Baker, Laurie Palmer, Katarina Weslien and Inigo Manglano- Ovalle.

So subtle as to flirt with disappearance, "Analemma" could be the show's quintessence if it weren't for the fact that just about every artwork here is deeply served by the curatorial theme and vice versa. This makes for a rich viewing experience and also a rare one. Thematic exhibitions too often serve curatorial ideas to the detriment of artistic ones. Not "The Presence of Absence," whose focus is less a narrow thesis than a complex yet broad proposal that intensifies rather than limits.

(Oddly enough, for all that Manglano-Ovalle's oeuvre has long revolved around political, social and architectural notions of presence and absence, his contribution — a weather vane mounted to the outside of a windowpane — feels the weakest. I suppose that it's technically absent from the gallery, and that the wind it measures comes and goes, but well, it is a windy corner.)

Consider Chase Heishman and Meara's "Long Fuse," a mesmerizing 55-minute video that closely follows an aquamarine fuse as it burns its way across leaves, grass, pavement, stone, bark, moss, ice, gravel, snow, black-and-white tile and red carpeting. Traversing sand, the force of the flame scatters grains; crossing water, it bubbles, fizzes and comes out alive; climbing cement stairs, it momentarily flails in midair. Reflections spurred include thoughts about the hypnotizing power of fire; the single long shot versus the appearance of one, made possible through sly editing that merges together scenes clearly shot during different seasons, for a technical kind of long fuse; the extraordinary potency of a simple idea; the effect of a tight camera shot to keep the focus on the here and now, because the then and there can't be seen.

And yet, as a result of curatorial suggestion, it is the alchemical properties of fire that ultimately entrance, how

the fuse line disappears from a tangible thing into many others: the energy of sparks and noise, movement, consumption, smoke, ash trails and singed leaves.

Palmer's "Hole" registers in the most opposite of ways. A towering, conical stack of weathered wood slats held together by nothing but gravity, it is utterly still and absorbent. But it feels as if it once had all the energy of a tornado, enough to rip up the torn-down houses from whence its wood came and whip into the gallery through the windows, only to get caught between columns that held it fast. The emptiness at the center of "Hole" can be peered into by climbing a ladder. Whether a hole even has an inside or an outside can be mused from up there as well as from underneath the structure.

Meanwhile, Baker's grid of 5,000 video diaries fills a visual and audio expanse so densely as to create another kind of emptiness. "Hello World! Or: How I Learned to Stop Listening and Love the Noise" could not be more contemporary or more frightful in its cacophonous grouping of introductions culled from the Internet via Baker's proprietary software. Though each represents the voice of some individual sharing whatever it is they feel the need to share, their sum total tests one's cynicism about a medium that purports to promote democratic and public speech, but often seems to testify instead to its loss.

One person who seems destined never to find a place in this digital world is Nanty, the young woman on whom Bass's eponymous short film focuses unwaveringly. Intimately projected just in front of the viewing bench on a floor-mounted screen, Nanty is almost right there, at our feet. Unkempt and pale, she crouches in a dirty hollow under some brush, smooths the ground with a stick, scrubs her hands in a river, scrapes her nails with the end of a twig. Bass's fragmentary character study, intense, repetitive and unguarded, presents a person absent of narrative, explanation and context, a person both intimately there and confoundingly, worryingly not.

Weslien offers up water and the stains left in its wake. In her "Decomposition of Memory Project," begun in 1998 and ongoing, fish tanks filled with curios and flowers are submerged in water, then left to wait. A year or so later, water evaporated, watermarks, rust, mildew and otherwise transformed objects remain. Memory doesn't seem decomposed so much as mimicked and contained, an invisible process made visible.

A second piece, "alignment," has none of the romantic nostalgia that suffuses "Decomposition" but all of its faith in the power of water. Here a pair of videos is waveringly projected onto fabric suspended in water-filled glass spheres. The gee-whiz novelty of the display mechanism thankfully does not get in the way of its magical, transient effect. The images come from adjacent projectors but also through crystal balls, and the distraught old man who peers out from one tries adamantly to speak but can't be heard. What upsets him so? Perhaps it's the water itself, which Weslien drew from the three holy rivers of India, one of which disappeared hundreds of years ago but is believed to flow underneath the other two.

Present or absent? Finally it depends on belief. "The Presence of Absence" runs through June 2 at the Hairpin Arts Center, 2800 North Milwaukee Ave.,

2nd floor, 773-392-1866, hairpinartscenter.org. Lori Waxman is a special contributor to the Tribune and an instructor at School of the Art Institute. ctc-arts@tribune.com