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Forces of nature

'Phantom' artists find epiphanies in the outdoors

By COLIN DABKOWSKI
News Arts Writer
2/16/2007

Artist Adam Chapman sees patterns in nature. Like plenty of dreamers, he watches birds flying overhead or droplets of rain trickling down his window with a sense of wonder and curiosity about how the world has created these phenomena.

PREVIEW

WHAT:
"Phantom Power"

WHEN:
Opens with a reception from 7 to 9 p.m. Saturday and runs through March 31

WHERE:
Carnegie Art Center, 240 Goundry St., North Tonawanda

INFO:
694-4400 or www.carnegieartcenter.org

But Chapman doesn't stop with contemplation. His two installations at the "Phantom Power" media art show in North Tonawanda's Carnegie Art Center relate natural patterns - flying birds, for instance - to cultural expression, like poetry. In Chapman's "Legible Nature: Fate Is an Afterthought," a computer-generated image projected onto the ceiling shows a flurry of birds flocking together every few seconds to form a letter. Those letters eventually spell out poems from the early Japanese poetry collection "Manyoshu." The effect is a kind of abstract redux of the well-known "infinite monkey" theorem, that unproven idea that a thousand monkeys at a thousand typewriters will eventually produce "The Gettysburg Address."

"I'm interested in exploring where we try to make sense out of the world around us," Chapman said, "the sort of fleeting epiphanies that we have in daily life."

Chapman and several others have turned their fleeting epiphanies into sustained installations in "Phantom Power," guest-curated by Carolyn Tennant, who also serves as media arts director at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center. The works each explore some element of the natural world, whether it's fire from a burning house, mosaics of Web cam shots or human linguistic tendencies.

"They all definitely explore instincts," Tennant said, "especially how we navigate the natural world."

"Phantom Power," a term normally reserved for audiophiles and Tragically Hip fans, lends this video show a kind of transgressive cross-medium modus operandi. It is not a cinematic experience, Tennant said, but rather a collection of installations designed to transplant viewers into a vastly different environment and prod them to think about the nature of, well, nature.

Mark Street, currently Hallwalls' media artist in residence, will show his 1989 film "Winterwheat," in which Street has painted, bleached and otherwise

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manipulated an old 16mm educational film strip to create what he calls "a theme or feeling of the apocalypse, this sense of impending doom." Scenes of a wheat thresher in a field appear through scratches and blots of bleach, which Street has applied directly to the film itself. The original strip, which has decayed to produce an oversaturated and deeply burnt look further distorted by Street, allowed Street the opportunity to construct a new environment on film.

"I reject the idea that there's a pure natural world," Street said. •

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