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Terry Berlier's pieces encircle social, ecological, musical

Kenneth Baker

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Terry Berlier's "Where the Beginning Meets the End" (2013), 88 piano keys, Mac mini, keyboard microcontroller, wire, wire nuts, wood spool, wood, copper pipe, screws and speakers. Photo: David Pace



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Sounds and time go in circles in Terry Berlier's array of cumbersome, mildly comical contraptions at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

Certain pieces even function or lend themselves to use as musical instruments.

"Where the Beginning Meets the End" (2013)

fans out a complete set of piano keys on a circular tabletop, to make something like a clock face marking 88 seconds or minutes, surrounded by handmade benches.

Press a key and the corresponding note sounds, thanks to electronics salvaged and repurposed, like all the other materials in the piece, during Berlier's residency in Recology San Francisco's Art at the Dump program.

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From a distance "Where the Beginning Meets the End" looks like a giant platter of hors d'oeuvres, which might explain its positioning near the exhibition's entrance.

But "Erased Loop Random Walk" actually begins outside, where random passersby see in one window of the SJICA a neon sign that alternately flashes "OPEN" and "Secret": a fit epigraph for a lot of exhibitions or artworks, it also winks out an oblique reference to the Snowden affair.

Subtexts of social and ecological concern thread through much of Berlier's work. The title of her "Ekman Transport (Plastic Ocean)" (2013) salutes the Swedish oceanographer Vagn Walfrid Ekman, who more than a century ago foresaw the possibility of formations such as the Great Pacific Ocean Garbage Patch.

With blue-pigmented cast concrete, clotted with common objects in relief, Berlier has tried to make real and bring close this hard-to-imagine mass of man-made detritus. The piece functions mainly as the marker of an honorable but, I suspect, unfulfilled ambition to awaken public alarm through art.

Berlier works more effectively when her aim appears more scattershot. A single room here houses three "Log-rhythms" (2013), rugged steel record players housing custom electronics. When the tone arm of each player contacts the spinning slab of tree trunk on its turntable, a changing medley of rumbles and growls comes forth, as the mechanism "plays" the information - nominally, the time - inscribed in the wood's growth.

The "Log-rhythms" owe something to the example of earlier work seen more than 20 years ago by Paul DeMarinis that purported to recover phonographically sounds of ancient Jericho embedded in excavated, reassembled potsherds. But Berlier's use of tree slices touches our guilt and anxiety about the consequences of headlong deforestation.

The "Log-rhythms" have a less direct counterpart in "Core Sampling (Tick Tock)" (2009), a very elaborate mechanism that appears to convert the visual information on a series of simulated geological core samples, into continually fluctuating percussive sound.

An adjacent piece converts the video input from the USB camera of "Core Sampling ..." to graphic output, playing upon the distance between the consequences of aggregate human activity and our ability to read its environmental signatures.

More personal pieces round out Berlier's show. "A Little Sunlight (for Val)" (2013) is a bare fluorescent bulb, easily overlooked, that spans a passage between movable walls, symbolizing affectionate tribute to a friend recently diagnosed with cancer.

The video projection "I Would Not Change It" (2013) describes an empty rocking chair, its soundtrack Berlier's reading of a letter from her late aunt Ceil, written at age 84, professing no regrets about the lesbian life she had chosen, secretly, long before.

Terry Berlier: Erased Loop Random Walk: Sculpture and video. Through Feb. 15. San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, 560 S. First St., San Jose. (408) 283-8155. www.sjica.org.

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