CULTURE

Ballroom Marfa launches fall exhibitions exploring land and the self



Photo courtesy Ballroom Marfa

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MARFA — Ballroom Marfa on Saturday hosted an opening celebration heralding the launch of its fall exhibitions, which explore our relationships to the land we live on and what tethers our inner world to the physical world we inhabit.

Ecstatic Land, a multimedia exhibition and screening series, subverts the traditional landscape found in Western art — with its focus on framing a certain view of the physical world — and instead seeks to present the phenomenon of existing in a physical space while being transported elsewhere, emotionally and psychologically. The works challenge the landscape's single-point perspective and bring in a more personalized view of the land, exploring the connection between our exterior and interior worlds.

This approach to landscapes is meant to be politically subversive as well, in that it seeks to challenge the "privatization, misuse, and over-consumption" of resources, per Ballroom's release on the exhibition.

The exhibition includes the works of artist Teresa Baker, who uses Astroturf and sewn-in materials like yarn and buffalo hide to create abstract landscapes, the unconventional shapes of which challenge the rigidity of borders and ownership.

"In general, land just continues and continues," said Baker. "And I think this way our eye, viewing, it can go on and off the work, and I really like that because it feels a little freer than being stuck in a square."

Artist Christie Blizard, who primarily works with sound, has two videos showcased in the exhibition's screening series. One, called "Plant Songs," documents the artist's experience hearing plants and trees cry out in distress; the video was filmed on location, where Blizard's encounter took place, and uses synthesizer sounds and opera singer Bronwyn White. The second video, "Cactus," is a digital animation that makes use of a body in a cactus costume set to Blizard's sound art.

Blizard explained that her work with sound serves to bridge the gap between the physical world we inhabit and another, unseen realm.

"I predominantly use sound as a means to try to communicate past the death dimension, so try to communicate to spirits, to ghosts — to different entities, whether it's plants or ghosts," said Blizard. The artist said she uses electricity to attempt to "tap into different frequencies or different zones" wherein some entity may be trying to communicate.

This was the goal of Blizard's performance at Ballroom on Saturday evening, for which she wore a hard mask to completely hide her features, an alien headpiece, a crop top that read "Daddy," galaxy-print leggings and light-up sneakers. As her otherworldly soundtrack filled the space, Blizard writhed on the ground, groaned, pointed the tentacle-like fixtures on her headpiece at audience members and partially removed her clothing.

"I'm going to be trying to summon some kind of benevolent deity, benevolent ghost or something, to try to shed light, just to try to see what it has to say," she said before the performance.

"For me, sound waves are these really interesting phenomena that can move through space and around space, so it is kind of the land — it's how the land speaks."

Ballroom is also showcasing artist Kenneth Tam's solo exhibition, *Tender is the hand which holds the stone of memory* — which, though separate from *Ecstatic Land*, holds some thematic similarities. Tam's work is inspired by the experience of Chinese laborers who built the Transcontinental Railroad in the nineteenth century. The exhibition — through a video installation and through sculpture — explores the powerful mythology of Manifest Destiny and American westward expansion from the perspective of those unnamed workers who left archeological fragments at the railroad work sites.

The exhibition includes sculptures made of reconfigured Western saddle parts combined with fake rocks containing objects reminiscent of those that might be found at one of the work sites — some contemporary, some more representative of the late nineteenth century. An opium vial, a security whistle, and a glass bottle are among those objects.

"I'm interested in this idea of how we understand the past through the archeological record and the ways in which that informs how we understand the past but also the shortcomings of that," said Tam. "Because so many of these migrants, they left no written account of their experiences, all we know about them is through their trash."

Tam also constructed large sculptures of the coins the migrants would have brought with them to the sites then buried as a good luck ritual. The sculptures are cast out of dirt and resin and have dried vegetables, which the workers reportedly brought with them, embalmed inside. "I was really interested in that gesture of using money in this non-monetary way, as a way not only responding to their really dangerous work conditions but the general fear they had being foreigners in this country in the 1860s," he said.

Ecstatic Land also includes contributions from Laura Aguilar, Genesis Báez, Dineo Seshee Bopape, The Frank Duncan Archive, Nancy Holt, Katherine Hubbard, Isuma, Benny Merris, Alan Michelson, Laura Ortman, Elle Pérez, Sondra Perry and David Benjamin Sherry. It will be on view at Ballroom Marfa through May 7, 2023.

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