Sensing Marfa’s many topographies: ‘Kite Symphony’ by Roberto Carlos Lange and Kristi Sword

In Marfa, two artists turn unexpected pandemic circumstances into opportunities for sonic connection.

In “Kite Symphony” at Ballroom Marfa, artists Roberto Carlos Lange and Kristi Sword tune into the sonic topographies of their environment and encourage us to do the same.

What was originally formulated as a brief visit for the artists to produce a short film and musical score grew into a six-month residency once the
Covid-19 pandemic gripped the world in March 2020. Lange, a musician who also performs under the name Helado Negro, and Sword, a visual artist, remained in Marfa through the support of the gallery and produced the multidisciplinary works on view in “Kite Symphony.”

The exhibition consists of sound, video, drawing, and sculpture spread across Ballroom’s inside spaces and courtyard. And there’s an online presence through the album “Kite Symphony, Four Variations,” uploaded to Bandcamp. Ballroom Marfa will also host an Earth Day celebration day of performances from the artists and their collaborators on April 22, 2022.

My viewing experience begins with a series of black ink drawings in a small alcove known as “Drawings for Radio Telescope” (2021). Each work depicts circular formations of undulating lines emanating from their centers, where a central void of white paper peeks through to create a pupil-like configuration. Some are contained by their frames while others are caught in its limbo, half visible as they drift out of view.

The exhibition’s curator Sarah Melendez describes the drawings as “visual representations of music through symbols outside the world of traditional music notation.” Their repetitive nature also harkens to sound waves, or meteorological tools used to track weather patterns on paper. While abstract and stark in their appearance, the formations feel inviting, intimate, and meditative.

Through this space I enter a curtained-off room containing the video work “Kite Symphony Catalog” (2021). In the center of the darkened environment are four bean bag chairs sewn from shiny silver material. They reflect the cool-toned video projection to create an otherworldly glow in the space. Crunching down into my seat, I am brought back to my childhood of chasing the tiny white synthetic beans across the room as they escaped from my own much-used bean bag.

The space itself seems primed for this type of mental transportation. An ambient soundtrack of distant sounds plays as I watch a kite floating in the sky. Its silver panels take turns reflecting the sun as it drifts in front of it. The kite is a kinetic sculpture in its truest sense, dependent on environmental elements to spurn its movement. In the gallery, the silver bean bags echo the kite's kineticism and materiality.

Silver notes continue in the central gallery containing the physical remnants of the outdoor installation work “Curious Hue in My Ear” (2021). A substantial mass of white balloons is strung together with a silver metal fringe that begs to brought to life on a breeze. Though visually striking, these chimes are rendered silent in the still gallery setting, losing much of their potential impact.
Beyond this a door leads to the outside courtyard. Strewn across the rocky space are concrete chairs cast in varying crescent formations. Surveying them all is like taking in a deconstructed lunar calendar. I choose one in the sun after the coolness of the gallery and sit, noting the diverse sounds playing from the courtyard speakers: a
thunderstorm, crunching leaves, whistling, rattling, a bird chirping, and many unidentifiable noises. Overlaying this are artificial tones from a musical synthesizer. A lively interplay emerges as I get up to walk around the space, integrating the sound of crunching gravel beneath my feet with the recorded soundtrack.

As I wrap up my time at the exhibition with the multi-channel “Star Scores” (2021), I hear a siren blaring in the distance. It blends seamlessly into the buoyant soundtrack of the work, and I think nothing more of it. It isn’t until I leave the gallery and see the police car parked outside behind a pulled over vehicle that I gain clarity.

This moment of fusion between everyday banality and creative expression condenses Lange’s and Sword’s aim as I see it. “Kite Symphony” points to our typically unacknowledged surroundings — the elements that are always there but become invisible in our everyday rush to and fro. Kite Symphony weaves them together into an essential mesh that protects, arranges, contains, and stabilizes our lives.

To make work about and from the land is to inherently ruminate on its histories, its presents, and its futures. Particularly in places like Marfa where the environment already exists in extremes, the ecological elements of our mesh are frayed. How will the sonic topographies around Marfa change as global warming deepens its hold?
My mind lingers on these issues even as I write from Austin, on the tail end of yet another winter storm that threatened the state’s overextended energy grid. There is an implicit urging at the helm of “Kite Symphony” to tune into our surroundings before we are too far gone.

Each individual piece of this exhibition feeds back into its source like streams to a river. While the most immediate undercurrent of Kite Symphony is its soundscapes, there is also the underlying pulse of the connective potentials created through the artist’s collaborative process — not only between themselves, but between the environment they lived within throughout their unplanned residency.

The exhibition is both a response to the artist’s temporary habitat and an invitation to those who encounter the works. Specifically, it’s an invitation to tune into one’s own visual and sonic environments, wherever they are.
The pandemic encouraged many of us to slow down. The unstated question from Lange and Sword seems to be, what will you do with that time?

“Kite Symphony” continues through May 7 at Ballroom Marfa in Marfa, Texas. ballroommarfa.org. Admission is free though currently Ballroom requests reservations be made during its opening hours, 12 noon to 6 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays.