



Steve Roden and Stephen Vitiello, ...from *perfect cubes to broken trains* (2008)

Why not let art speak – or sing – for itself? In ‘Ballroom Marfa’, track seven of Nina Katchadourian’s CD compilation *The Marfa Jingles* (2008), the artist croons to a the Blue Danube waltz: ‘This fall we hit the ground / With a show that features sound / The Marfa Sessions are all throughout town / To visit the show just take a walk around.’ Katchadourian’s song was part of the Ballroom’s ‘The Marfa Sessions’, an exhibition curated by Regine Basha, Rebecca Gates and Lucy Raven that brought together 15 artists whose works in sound addressed some of the diverse facets of a singular place: Marfa, Texas.

As Katchadourian suggests, to visit ‘The Marfa Sessions’ one took a walk (or a drive) around town: five of the show’s works plus the Marfa Sessions Resource Library were presented in the Ballroom’s galleries; the other ten sound works were installed at various sites, including a highway billboard, a hotel lounge and the local newspaper, *The Big Bend Sentinel*. The show’s strongest works addressed specific aspects of this unusual community: its history as a ranching town and military base; its emergence as an art pilgrimage destination in the early 1970s, when Donald Judd set up residence and founded the Chinati Foundation; its magnificent desert landscape; and the ways these aspects have come together to create Marfa’s contemporary fabric of culture, commerce and leisure.

The current texture of everyday life in this corner of Big Bend country was best captured in *The Marfa Jingles*. The project was devised as a way to get to know the area by Katchadourian who offered to write a free jingle for anyone who wanted one and then collaborated with local musicians to make these bouncy blends of country, pop and folk melodies. The ten songs form a delightful portrait of new and old Marfa: their lyrics are affectionately witty and their tunes match the characters of the businesses and non-profits they describe, which range from the Marfa Public Library to the ‘Get Go’ gourmet market to the Rotary Club. Initially performed in a concert for the show’s opening weekend, *The Marfa Jingles* were also aired on Marfa Public Radio throughout the duration of ‘The Marfa Sessions’ and are for sale as a CD.

Although not commissioned for ‘The Marfa Sessions’, another site-referential collection of jingle of sorts is Louise Lawler’s *Birdcalls* (1972/1981), for which the artist inventively warbled, chirped and squawked the names of 28 contemporary male Minimalist, post-Minimalist, Conceptual, Pop and Neo-Expressionist artists – from Vito Acconci to Lawrence Weiner (with Judd in between). *Birdcalls* employs aural humour and mimicry to signal alarm at the exclusion of women from

the art world of its time. Installed at a defunct swimming-pool on Chinati Foundation grounds, *Birdcalls* plants a feminist aviary in the heart of Judd country. The farthest-flung sound piece was Steve Roden and Stephen Vitiello’s ...from perfect cubes to broken trains(2008). Located on farmland two miles from town, a makeshift shack housed solar-powered audio equipment that played a four-channel recording from a live performance in which Roden and Vitiello improvised a soundscape based on the ambient noise in the Chinati Foundation’s artillery sheds, home to Judd’s 100 milled aluminium boxes. There was a pleasing circularity to this piece: the origin of the town’s presence as an art destination (Judd’s ‘perfect cubes’) was, through sonic interpretation, situated at a remote site in the desert landscape – the very characteristics of Marfa that drew Judd there in the first place.

A mile beyond the town’s perimeter, references to Western gunfighting and Marfa’s military history were embedded in Inigo Mangano-Ovalle’s *Sonambulo* (Marfa Version) (*Sleepwalker*, 2008), an 11-minute recording of what sounded like a rainstorm but was actually a manipulated digital distension of the bang from a single gunshot. The piece was transmitted from speakers at a recreational park bandstand.

If you were within earshot of *Sonambulo*, you found yourself at a spot offering a view of golfers putting, a freight train passing in the distance, children playing soccer and their parents barbecuing to their own soundtrack of 1980s’ rock – all set against a mountainous backdrop. Although the specifics would change from one visit to another, the soundwork’s potential to offer a picture of Marfa that most visitors would otherwise miss points to the strength of ‘The Marfa Sessions’ as a broader project.

The weaker works in the show approached sound as an abstract phenomenon and so came across as vague or oblique. And in a show that ‘seeks to call the ear to ... the breadth of this complex setting’ it was surprising that so few works referred in any substantial way to the economic complexities of art gentrifying far-flung locales such as this one. Overall, though, through its network of mini-pilgrimages (which reiterated the larger trek of getting to Marfa in the first place), ‘The Marfa Sessions’ functioned as an engaging composite portrait of the exhibition’s site, where the real star of the show was Marfa itself.

-Emily Liebert