

For Matthew Ritchie, it's playtime at the ICA

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 03, 2014



ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Matthew Ritchie at the ICA, where the British-born, New York-based artist has an 18-month residency.

Late last week, as the clatter and crunch of construction in front of the Institute of Contemporary Art seeped into the building, two artists, a couple of staffers, and I gathered in the lobby to try out a new interactive sound installation.

A grid had been mapped in blue on the floor, alongside a wheeling wall painting by Matthew Ritchie, which stretched around the corner onto the window bay looking out on the construction site. Wall painting and sound installation together are called “Remanence/Remonstrance.”

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If the racket outside punctuated the scene with a chaotic rumble, Ritchie’s diagrammatic mural, similar to the public art piece he mounted last September in Dewey Square, mixes chaotic energy with elegance and intention. The Dewey Square mural and the lobby installation are components of the British-born, New York-based artist’s 18-month artist residency at the ICA.

I was the first to step on the grid. A low, pleasing clarinet note filled the lobby, and began repeating. I stepped to another square, and a soothing, simple riff, also on clarinet, played over the repeating note. As others joined me, a clarinet chorus immersed us, driving away the noise outside. As the sounds multiplied, they built into rippling rhythms, and then blocks of chords.

**Matthew Ritchie:
Remanence/Remonstrance**

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The music was a balm, and at the same time energizing. I found myself caught up, plotting where to step next, wondering what I would trigger.

“At the beginning, you feel like an individual affecting the piece,” Ritchie said. “At the end, you still feel like you’re affecting it, but now you know you are part of it.”

The music, set off by motion sensors, comes from a larger piece, “Propolis,” composed by Bryce Dessner of The National, sound designer David Sheppard, and Evan Ziporyn, professor of music at MIT.

The sounds generated are not as simple as cause-and-effect; computer programming makes it more nuanced than that.

“It plays lines and movements that repeat, or don’t,” said Sheppard. “Half of it won’t work until you’ve done the first half. Once it unlocks, then you can just play.”

Like the music, the wall painting builds momentum. Closer to the admissions desk, where you take your first step onto the music grid, the painting is spare. As it swoops toward the windows, it gets denser, with bold calligraphic gestures, spinning nebulae, and washes of orange and peach. On the window, there are suggestions of a broken landscape. A circle, radiating in gray-black tendrils, hovers high at the end, echoing the one at the top of the Dewey Square mural.

This is the first time the lobby art has extended to the window.

“There’s an implied dimensionality with two walls,” said Ritchie. “The music provides an extra dimension of time.”

“The way Matthew has used two surfaces of the lobby is a different experience of space,” said the ICA’s senior curator Jenelle Porter. “As soon as you walk in, it fully envelops you.”

It also does not hide the construction going on outside. Ritchie is as engaged with the city, and its changing face, as he is with the museum.

“It’s the last time this wall will be backlit,” said Ritchie. “The installation will be here for the duration of construction, and when it comes down, there will be a high-rise.”

Over the weekend, the composers performed “Propolis” in the ICA lobby, then walked to the nearby Chapel of Our Lady of Good Voyage, where the concert continued. The chapel, which was built in 1952, will move as the waterfront is developed, according to Porter. The performance there ties the piece to the past, as the window drawing ties it to the future.

Ritchie said the sound installation will be a kind of memory of the concert.

“Remanence,” the title of every piece Ritchie makes at the ICA, is a scientific term for the magnetization that remains in computer chips or credit cards after the magnetic field has been removed: a trace, a memory, a resonance.

Other elements of the artist’s residency include an ongoing project with the ICA’s Teen Arts Council and Fast Forward new media students, and a multimedia performance in December.

All the works in the project tie together, and the key can be found in another diagrammatic painting Ritchie has made around the corner from the lobby, in the elevator bay. In it, a wild grid — arcs of time and space — twist upward through loosely drawn axes anchored to four poles. The horizontal axis stretches between object and concept. The vertical reaches from self to unknown.

“In every practice, you have to reconcile these two sets of opposites,” Ritchie said. “How can you represent all four points rather than one or the other of the axes?”

Porter smiled. “Being slightly overwhelmed by this information is important,” she said.

“It’s like looking at the ocean. You can say, ‘God, it’s so big,’ and you can go home,” Ritchie said. “Or you can go swimming.”

You just have to be willing to play — to immerse yourself — and become part of the composition.

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