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Art | Imaginative clamor, contemplative quiet

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All of life's alternatives should be as clear-cut as those on offer at the Institute of Contemporary Art. Visitors who prefer to think go upstairs, to an intriguing exhibition of photographs and photo-constructions by Philadelphia artist Eileen Neff. Those more inclined toward play stay downstairs, in a group installation called "Ensemble," a collection of "art" that makes noise.

The 27 conspirators responsible for "Ensemble" have concocted a farrago of objects that boom, bong, clang, click, clunk, clatter, creak, rattle, roar, sproing, whistle and whoosh. Only an exceptionally credulous or charitable soul would call most of it art.



"Night Falls," 2001, by Eileen Neff, from her show of photographs and photo-constructions at ICA.

"Ensemble" is imaginative, I'll concede that, and a few of the "artists" even demonstrate some skill beyond noisemaking. The problem is that the show's conceptual foundation is risibly jejune. Almost all the pieces are one-trick ponies. The sounds produced aren't especially appealing, and once each artist demonstrates his or her shtick there's nothing more to think about.

"Ensemble" owes its existence to guest curator Christian Marclay, a New York musician and performance artist. The works he deployed around the first-floor gallery achieve their purposes in a variety of ways.

Some pieces are viewer-activated, beginning with the cluster of thick bamboo poles that Mineko Grimmer has hung in front of the gallery entrance. As one pushes the poles aside to enter the room, the poles clunk and click against one another, like a randomly struck xylophone.

If you prefer something more alarming, lift the lid on Yoshi Wada's trash can and a shrieking siren threatens to burst your eardrums. Best to keep your distance because Alarming Trash Can qualifies as a lethal weapon.

Several visitor-activated pieces actually produce musical sounds. These include the black glass bells that Jim Hodges has hung from the ceiling and Doug Aitken's percussive soundboard, a hollow box that looks like a guitar-shaped tabletop. One plays it with mallets.

Marclay has even included a Harry Bertoia chiming sculpture, a bunch of vertical, top-heavy metal rods that jangle when you set the cluster in motion. Bertoia's sculptures always beg to be touched, but normally one must abstain. Here you can clang away to your heart's content, if you do so gently.

Some pieces operate on timers that activate them periodically. David Ellis' Trash Talk is one of the most obtrusive of these. It's a pile of sidewalk trash, bagged and bundled, programmed to sound like drums falling downstairs.

A few pieces never seemed to make a sound during my visit. Yoko Ono's telephone never rang - you're supposed to answer it if it does - while several others are so genteel that they're nearly impossible to hear over the Cagean cacophony.

The most enchanting of these belongs to a French artist, Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, who set some drinking glasses and ceramic bowls afloat in a plastic kiddie pool. A pump generates a slow circulating current that produces occasional collisions, and concomitant tinkling sounds. This piece is unusual in being visually appealing as well as aurally demonstrative.

So, yes, "Ensemble" does contain a few seductive moments, but they're transitory, a triumph of cleverness over content. And once you go upstairs to see Neff's photographs, "Ensemble" becomes annoyingly disruptive, because its noises carry.

Neff's photographs and photo-constructions are quiet, lyrically poetic, psychologically intense and intellectually provocative. They aren't well-served by being installed in such close proximity to junkyard bang and clatter.

Neff's show comprises works made during the last 10 years. Trained as a painter, she often inserts painterly grace notes into her compositions, which typically are created on her computer. Nominally, most of the images in this show are landscapes, although they aren't primarily descriptive, nor do they evoke specific locales.

They're essentially visual poems on the Emily Dickinson model (even though Neff seems more attached to Wallace Stevens), concise exercises in memory, perception, suggestion and ambiguity. Her images are as much imagined as discovered, and often seem to be more products of her mind than of her eye.

It's a mark of their special quality, I think, that Neff's photographs can't be adequately described, because to do so deprives them of their odd, sometimes mysterious, emotional resonance.

Some of her pictures blur the distinction between outdoors and indoors. Photos of landscapes displayed in plain interiors establish an odd dynamic - has the outdoors been brought in, or vice versa? Pictures such as Dickinson and Thoreau remind us that "inside" and "outside" are mental constructs as much as realities. Looking at a Neff photo, we can be in both places simultaneously.

This collection of about 30 pieces covers a variety of strategies. In *This and That*, Neff opts for pure painterliness; the loosely woven abstraction resembles multicolored gauze. *Enter Night*, a view of a road disappearing into dense conifers at dusk, re-creates the moodiness of Hopper, just as *Slipping Glimpse*, an absurdly slender slice of a landscape, evokes Barnett Newman's "Zips."

Some photos are stitched together from obvious juxtapositions, in which, for instance, a reflected scene doesn't correlate to what is supposedly reflected. Such sly surrealism is common in Neff's work, but it's never mordant or overbearing. One thinks sometimes of Magritte, although the parallel feels more coincidental than intentional.

I especially like the composites such as *Over the Hill* and *Night Falls* whose artifice is so deftly achieved that it becomes plausibly naturalistic. You sense you're not looking at an actual patch of geography, and yet your mind insists on accepting the image as such because it satisfies emotionally.

Several pictures, *Falls by Car* and *Circle in the Rain* in particular, are just plain mysterious, even spooky. They're minimal, primal images of raindrops on glass that invite each viewer to superimpose his or her own real or imagined experiences on them.

There's even a dollop of unadulterated reality in the show, a picture of two trees that Neff encountered in the wilds of South Jersey. A large black walnut, usually toxic to other forms of

vegetation, seems to be embracing a considerably smaller red cedar that's intertwined with the walnut's lower branches. For once, Neff adopts one of nature's contrivances.

Yet while undeniably charming and humorous, *Summer (The Couple)* isn't what she does best. She has long been one of Philadelphia's more intellectually challenging artists, someone who rarely eases up on her audiences even while tantalizing them visually. This show is perhaps her most captivating to date. If only it didn't have to share the same zip code with a screaming trash can.

"Ensemble" and "Eileen Neff: Between Us" continue at the Institute of Contemporary Art, 36th and Sansom Streets, through Dec. 16. The ICA is open from noon to 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays and from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Admission is \$6 general and \$3 for artists, seniors and students over 12. Information: 215-898-5911 or www.icaphila.org.