An Encounter with Presence: Emery Blagdon + Shannon Stratton

Starting in the 1960s in rural Nebraska, Emery Blagdon (1908–1986) built an increasingly dense environment filled with sculptures made of baling wire and aluminum foil, brightly colored paintings, hand-painted lightbulbs, salts, and other organic matter. Impacted by personal tragedy, Blagdon worked for nearly thirty years on this constantly changing installation—“The Healing Machine”—designed to channel the earth’s energies to alleviate pain and illness. Believing he was unusually sensitive to electrical currents, Blagdon eagerly explored the curative potential of electricity.

After Blagdon’s death, the pharmacist who had helped him years before—Dan Dryden—returned for a visit to find Blagdon gone and his entire oeuvre up for sale. With friends, Dryden bought and preserved The Healing Machine and the pieces left in Blagdon’s workshop. In 2004, Kohler Foundation acquired The Healing Machine as Blagdon had last left it, consisting of some four hundred individual components. In 2007, following a major conservation initiative, Kohler Foundation gave Blagdon’s Healing Machine to the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

Shannon R. Stratton, the William and Mildred Lasdon Chief Curator at the Museum of Arts and Design, collaborated with the Arts Center on ENCOUNTERS WITH PRESENCE. As an artist, curator, and writer, Stratton is interested in furthering the discourse around contemporary craft, community building, and artist-run centers. Stratton draws connections between the sound environment of Harry Bertoia and Blagdon’s healing environment. Her response to The Healing Machine is further elucidated with the inclusion of prints by Ben F. Laposky (1914–2000) and the commissioning of a new sound piece by Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe (NY).

How were you first introduced to the work of Emery Blagdon?

I was first introduced to the work of Emery Blagdon as a graduate student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in a class on visionary artists and artist-built environments. I didn’t see the installation in person until I came up to the Arts Center to see Sublime Spaces and Visionary Worlds in 2007.

How does your own background inform your response to Blagdon’s work?

What always enchanted me about Blagdon’s work was how it was conceived as this ongoing cumulative place, wherein the act of making was just as important as space itself in its intent to heal. The connection between the making and the made with The Healing Machine is so profound for me. This connects to my thinking about craft in that the motivation to make is embedded with meaning, both in the process of “doing” as well as the actual objects themselves.
I have been working with the idea of craft and its relevance to social practice and self-care and am seeing more and more contemporary artists accessing craft materials and methodologies to do this kind of work. What’s compelling about Blagdon is that he predates the contemporary confluence of craft, social practice, and place making. He was creating a site as a radical alternative to existing institutions, determined to build a place of healing and safety.

I decided to bring Harry Bertoia’s Sonambient sculptures into dialogue with Blagdon as these two artists were building distinct environments and working in the United States at a similar point in history. Blagdon was building a Healing Machine, and Bertoia’s sounding sculptures, collectively called Sonambient, were the culmination of his life’s practice and interest in intangible concepts of the “cosmic.” Bertoia had a poetic relationship with nature and was compelled by the notion of atmosphere, yet little has been written about this.

I recently curated the exhibition Atmosphere for Enjoyment: Harry Bertoia’s Environment for Sound at the Museum of Arts and Design (NYC) and incorporated commissions by contemporary sound artists and musicians. Lizzi Bougatsos and Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe were invited to the Bertoia Barn in Pennsylvania to make new recordings on the Sonambient sculptures and do further performances at the museum on sculptures made by Harry Bertoia’s son, Val Bertoia. I invited Lowe to continue that work for this exhibition by contributing a new composition that bridges the work of the two artists. Like a game of telephone, he further expanded the exhibition by bringing in Ben F. Laposky’s “Oscillons.” These photographs were made using an oscilloscope and sine wave generator to make abstract images of sound waves.

I think it is such an exciting conversation between Blagdon and Bertoia. They were both very much thinking about space, vibrations, and energy. Blagdon’s paintings look like cosmic floor plans or diagrams; the mobile-like structures he created are intended to capture and distill energy. Bertoia’s monotypes look like sound waves or a rendering of the space-time continuum. His Sonambient sculptures appear to reach out to catch the surrounding invisible currents of air. While Bertoia also installed his sculptures in his barn, which contributes to a spatial understanding of the sculptures, it is the sounds those sculptures make that contribute to a sense of awe. It is interesting to think about what is the spatial in art environments. Beyond the actual architecture, I think this might have to with ideas of atmosphere or, as the Germans call it, stimmung.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht writes beautifully about this concept in his book Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature. In it, he considers the effects of presence as an aesthetic experience. Blagdon and Bertoia are making work that is all about the effect of presence, their work produces atmospheres and moods that cannot be rationalized as much as experienced and felt.
Has working on this exhibition changed or expanded your notions about what you do?

This is an incredible opportunity to experiment and to bring other elements into the discussion of art environments and an artist’s work. I’m a big fan of experimental curatorial practice, something curators don’t get to do enough at museums because the institution will often shy away from challenging dominant historical or biographical narratives about an artist with more poetic interpretations.

I think the Arts Center did something quite phenomenal with the reinstallation of these visionary art environments, in that they asked their guests to respond in “visionary” ways—at least ways that might not be normally embraced or sanctioned by traditional institutions. That opportunity alone has expanded my work and thinking considerably.