

Drum Listens to Heart Part I



*Drum Listens to Heart, 2022.
Installation view, CCA Wattis Institute.
Photo by Impart Photography.*

By Renata
Blanco

“Drum Listens to Heart” is a three-part exhibition at The Wattis Institute. Part I took place from September 1st to October 15th. The main focus of the exhibition is, as the title indicates, the drum, not only referring to the musical instrument, but rather to its percussive quality. The exhibition explores expressions of percussion, as sound, rhythm, or the act of striking objects. The show is composed of works from multiple artists and displays their approaches to considering percussion and its social, political, musical, and personal contexts. For me, the overall experience of the exhibition felt like a journey through different perspectives, approaches, and aesthetics, with every piece coming into conversation with the next.

The gallery space was divided into multiple sections within the Wattis. Once I got to experience the exhibition as a whole, it felt as if I got to see several different ways in which the body percusses, or interacts with percussion. For example, I was made aware of the percussion inside my own body, as well as the possibility of taking an action in order to produce sound. The first section of the exhibition shows work by Milford Graves. The work of Graves focuses on the body, specifically the heart. We can see several sculptures that show fake human skeletons surrounded by different objects and materials. One of the works includes monitors showing a beating heart. There were Christmas lights, thread, wire, and statues that I could not identify but gave the pieces a sense of mysticism. This made me think of the relationship between the body and sound, not just sound from the outside, but sound inside ourselves, like the heartbeat. In a sense, the work of Milford Graves serves as an introduction and makes us aware of our body and the percussive power held in it. In his work, we can see how the body has percussion on the inside (multiple references to the heart, and the beating of it). We are also able to take action to produce percussion. Many of the sculptures are surrounded by drums which highlight this possibility of sound through action.

Moving further into the exhibition, I was surprised to see an installation by Em'kal Eyongakpa. The way in which the exhibition allows you to move from Milford Graves' work on to Eyongakpa's installation generates a clear narrative in which we transition from a consideration of both the interior and exterior of the body, to focus on the inside of the body. Em'kal Eyongakpa's installation creates an experience in which it feels like we are underground, surrounded by coffin-like boxes and dirt on frames. My first impression of the installation definitely felt as if I was underground, but the web-like element that covered the ceiling instantly made me think of the heart and being inside the body. The more I looked, the more the ceiling, the use of red, and the

dark space made me think of veins, blood, and the heart. Adding to the experience, the installation also used thumping sounds that made me think of a heartbeat. Being in the installation made me reflect on the percussion that takes place inside our own bodies and how we are usually not aware of it, but it is always present. The installation made me feel as if I was intruding on an organic process of some kind. It made me aware of my own body and all the power held within it.

Moving forward, in the last section of the exhibition, we get to experience and interact with pieces that produce percussion, such as Davina Semo's bells. In this final section of the exhibition, it was clear to me that this is where the body interacted with the outside world. While the other sections focused more on the body, this final section focused on how we experience sounds from our environment. In this section, we can see works by artists Marcos Ávila Forero, Luke Anguhadluq, Barry Le Va, Rose Lowder, Lee Lozano, Davina Semo, Harold Mendez, and Michael E. Smith interact with each other. All of them speak to the action of percussion, whether that be musical or not—drumming, ringing bells, or smashing glass. After experiencing the other two sections of the exhibition, coming to this part of the gallery space made me highly aware of the power my body has in the world, and my agency. The invitation of Semo's work to ring the bells adds to the element of interaction with our surroundings and percussion in the outside world. Being able to interact with the piece helped me feel like a producer and not just an audience member.

Overall, the exhibition created a seamless connection between the works of all the artists, while also providing a clear path and narrative for the audience. The three sections in which the exhibition was divided speak to the topic of percussion beyond music. It was an extremely satisfying experience to see the different ways in which our body engages with percussion and the different meanings it can take, whether it be inside us, around us, or generated by us.

PART II of Drum Listens to Heart: November 9-December 17, 2022
PART III of Drum Listens to Heart: January 17- March 4, 2023

Renata Blanco Gorbea is a writer in the undergraduate program majoring in Art History and Visual Culture.