

GLASS HEART (BELLS FOR SYLVIA PLATH)

The Davis is extremely pleased to present the debut of *Glass Heart (bells for Sylvia Plath)*, an interactive installation by Assistant Professor of Music Composition and Theory, composer Jenny Olivia Johnson. Specially commissioned for presentation in the “Sight and Sound Gallery,” dedicated to exploring concepts of space across media, this innovative work is the first site-specific project to intimately integrate music and visual art.

Inspired by the intensity and depth of color in Sol LeWitt’s 1991 print suite, *All Combinations of Red, Yellow, and Blue, with Scribbles*, as well as by the words of poet Sylvia Plath, Johnson created a new cycle of songs, one of which provides the basis for this installation. *Glass Heart (bells for Sylvia Plath)* references synaesthesia, in which the stimulus of sensory perception in one area triggers an occurrence in another; for example, and in Johnson’s experience, certain colors may evoke particular sounds in the mind and vice versa.

According to Johnson, “My work often draws from disparate, fragmentary sources, and involves a long process of stitching together seemingly unrelated materials into an emotive palimpsest. I can only attribute this to my experience of synaesthesia: the texture of glass will evoke a Lydian harmony, which in turn will evoke luminous, liquid shades of blue and red, which in turn will remind me of blood flowing through a human heart, which will then circle me back to the exquisite emotional landscape of Sylvia Plath’s poetry (the letters of whose name, by the way, fall to me in shades of deep red and pink). When I discovered Plath’s poem “I Thought I Could Not Be Hurt,” everything was suddenly there: images of glass and of hearts, and in her language, all of the rich colors so vividly displayed in Sol LeWitt’s etchings. My response in turn is an audio-visual network of the sounds and colors I hear in her words, infused with my own imperfect memories and nameless emotions.”

These inspirations and associations, and the interconnections that she perceives among them, are the basis for Johnson’s creative work. So it is not only Plath’s “I Thought I Could Not Be Hurt,” and in particular the verse below, but the poet’s body of work that informs the song and the installation.

*(How frail the human heart must be—
a mirrored pool of thought. So deep
and tremulous an instrument
of glass that it can either sing,
or weep.)*

—Sylvia Plath, “I Thought That I Could Not Be Hurt,” 1947

Working from these suggestive lines, from phrases found in Plath’s journals, and with thoughts of her famous novel, *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963, Johnson built an actual “instrument of glass,” a group of seven bell jars that may be touched and played.

Johnson writes, “My design was initially inspired by the impact of electroshock therapy on the human brain—specifically the hippocampus and amygdala, the seats of early memory and primal emotion—a subject that permeates Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. Yet the more I thought about electroshock therapy and its potential impacts on one’s emotional knowledge and sense of self, the more I found myself meditating on the metaphor of the human heart as the epicenter of a human being’s emotions and affects. The fact that bell jars themselves are physically reminiscent of the shape of a human torso, in which a heart is caged, furthered my exploration of this idea...”

Visitors to this exhibition are invited to touch Johnson’s “glass hearts,” which resonate and glow in response.

As Johnson states, “Depending on how soft, hard, or frequently a given bell jar is touched, it will respond by “singing” back portions of my piece associated with varying emotional valences, such as fear, joy, excitement, melancholy—and also rhythmically illuminating its internal LEDs, designed to crudely resemble the veins and arteries intersecting and branching out from the human heart—according to the amplitude of the sample it is playing back. Based on the velocity of a visitor’s touch, the bell jar will also decide how fast or slow to sing the sample, whether to sing it normally or in reverse, and whether to include any digital signal processing (such as reverb or echo). Finally, the bell jars are designed to respond to gallery visitors and also to one another by “listening” to the noise level in the space and using that data to determine a variety of audio/visual parameters, such as amplitude levels of their individual dry signals as well as those of their echo and reverb processing signals, which in turn impact the speed of LED illumination.”

What we hear of Johnson’s composition for *Glass Heart* is entirely dependent upon our own physical interaction with the installation, whether we actively touch the bell jars or patiently wait to capture the ethereal sounds as they play out. The ringing of the glass itself is evidence of our own presence in the room and contribution to the piece. The song’s lyrics—Plath’s words—which we may or may not hear in the course of each experience, are rounded out with phrases from Ted Hughes’ “Last Letter,” an unfinished poem he wrote about the suicide of Plath, his wife. Regardless of the author, all of the words of Johnson’s song echo in the same high-pitched and disquieting female voice.

By deftly incorporating fragments of the Plath / Hughes texts, haunting vocals, and the experience of sound that eddies around the visitor in unexpected ways, Johnson’s *Glass Heart (bells for Sylvia Plath)* evokes the unpredictability and uncontrollability of memory. A daring foray into the potential of intersecting emotional undertones among distinct pieces of literature, music, and visual art, this work’s openness to mutation and moments of cacophony offers an immersive experience in which we may recognize personal connections. Johnson’s “...bell jars, repurposed as a choir of singing glass hearts,” powerfully suggest the potential resonance of human emotion, at its most communal and empathic.

—Elaine Mehalakes, *Kemper Curator of Academic Programs*

Jenny Olivia Johnson is Assistant Professor of Music Composition and Theory at Wellesley College. Her music, which has been hailed as “gorgeous, ominous, and hypnotic” by the *Boston Globe*, explores themes of musical synaesthesia, acoustic memory, and childhood trauma, and ranges from compressed electronic operas and epic pop songs to lacy, abstract chamber works and multi-media meditations using amplified instruments and video. This is her first installation and first museum commission.

Dorothy Johnston Towne Gallery

GLASS HEART (BELLS FOR SYLVIA PLATH)

JENNY OLIVIA JOHNSON

b. 1978, Santa Monica, CA

Glass Heart (bells for Sylvia Plath), 2013

Installation with glass bell jars, audio, and LED lights

MUSIC PERFORMED BY:

P. Lucy McVeigh, *soprano*

David Russell, *cello*

Jenny Tang, *piano*

Elika Akahori, *synthesizer*

Jenny Olivia Johnson, *percussion/electronics*

Recorded live in Jewett Auditorium,

Wellesley College, December 16, 2012

Quotes included in the music of *Glass Heart (bells for Sylvia Plath)*:

Liquors seep to me

In this glass capsule—Sylvia Plath, "Poppies in July," 1962

I thought...I could not be hurt

How frail the human heart must be—Sylvia Plath, "I Thought That

I Could Not Be Hurt," 1947

Enclosed in a wall of glass—Sylvia Plath, journal entry,

October 13, 1959

What happened that night

Inside your hours

Is as unknown as if it never happened.—Ted Hughes, "Last Letter," 1998

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SOL LEWITT

b. 1928, Hartford, CT—d. 2007, New York, NY

All Combinations of Red, Yellow, and Blue, with Scribbles, 1991

Set of seven etchings with aquatint

Ed. 30

Publisher: Creative Works Editions, Osaka, Japan

Printers: Joseph Montague, Deborah Tint, Naomi Strauss, Watanabe Studio, New York, NY

The Nancy Gray Sherrill, Class of 1954, Collection
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