

Visual vibrations

Artistic duo Elaine Miles and Eugene Ughetti chat about their recent glass show, music and what it's like to push sensory boundaries....

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The stage is set. On both sides, long white counters filled with glass objects shimmer mysteriously. There are glass bowls of various sizes, rows of glass tubes, glass spirals, and other smaller pieces. The most eye-catching holds centre stage: an installation of finely decorated glass plates in different sizes, hanging from a forest of wires. The display glints under the spotlights, looking beautiful and scarily fragile.

While the scene is captivating in its own right, this is no ordinary art show. It is the result of a hugely successful collaboration between glass artist Elaine Miles and percussionist/composer Eugene Ughetti. Three years ago, the Melbourne-based duo embarked on an exploratory journey to merge visual art installation with music and The Glass Percussion Project was born. With a collection of over 1000 pieces of hand-blown glass, each live show is a blend of art, musical composition, sound engineering and lighting design.

As we waited for the show to begin, the lights dimmed and an ethereal, almost otherworldly, sound flowed through the hall. A man in white walked into the light, blowing into a glass tube. As he played, the vibrations layered over each other, sounding remarkably like the baritone of the didgeridoo (a wind instrument developed by the indigenous Australians). Moving smoothly from one installation to the next, Ughetti played on a variety of glass objects, including wind chimes and a xylophone-like marimba, using drumsticks and knitting needles and recreated the sounds of rain, blowing wind and thunder in the room. Elaine Miles says that this is exactly what they had intended. "A lot of the sounds we strive to create here relate to inner sound; the sounds that one can hear from within."

Inspiration

Although the objects within her installation are inspired by traditional as well as non-traditional musical instruments, ranging from Tibetan bowls, goblets, gongs, the maracas and udu drums, none is a copy. Miles also allows the glass to retain its natural imperfections. "Rather than focussing on making one piece that is perfect, I make 100 imperfect pieces that come together beautifully in a whole installation," she says.

The idea for the Glass Percussion Project came about purely by accident. Miles, who has a doctorate in Fine Arts with a specialisation in glass blowing, had created a series of pieces, but only recognised that they could be used for something unusual when she saw some street performers playing on glass. A short while later, she heard a percussionist on the radio, playing on what sounded like glass. She contacted the artist, Eugene Ughetti. As they got talking, they realised they were both very excited about experimenting with their art. A few practice sessions later, the Glass Percussion Project came to life.

Ughetti comes from a long line of



DRAWING OUT THE BEST: Glass and rhythms PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE / CHRISTOPHER LIM.

percussionists, and started playing when he was just six years old. Classically trained, he has performed internationally and is also the artistic director of Speak Percussion, an organisation committed to developing percussion players in Australia.

In addition to being experimental artists, both Miles and Ughetti are drawn towards Spirituality and Meditation. Miles says, "I liked that Eugene was intuitively able to choose the right combination of instruments for each show. What he brings is his body as an instrument, and my glass is the material."

Despite the natural imperfections that exist in hand blown glass — or perhaps because of it — Ughetti is able to skilfully draw out the best quality of sound from each object. But how does he deal with the uncertainty of not knowing the exact sound that could

emerge from the glass each time he plays? "The instruments are arranged by pitch, size, texture and even by sound quality, so we can get the best possible sound from it," he clarifies.

Factors like humidity and temperature don't affect his playing, or the glass, but the acoustics of the surrounding environment does. So sound engineering plays an important role in modulating the sound, allowing for certain parts of the music to be enhanced. Here, sound artist Michael Hewes's contribution is crucial. Ughetti emphasises that, contrary to popular belief, sound engineering is a part of the performance and should not be seen as being separate.

Also important in these shows is audience participation. Miles is keen for viewers to interact with the glass. "Most people are afraid to do so; given how fragile it looks." But with Ughetti's playing, people realise that the glass is touchable and very tangible. "Of course, things do get broken occasionally," she laughs, "but the whole process of interaction with the glass is very important in the whole experience."

No limits

Interestingly, both Eugene Ughetti and Elaine Miles are hailed as performance artists; although Miles does not actually perform. Clearly, the Glass Percussion Project has been a success but both co-directors are not willing to be limited by this one project. While she is now experimenting with sound, visual art is still a large part of what Miles wants to do. Ughetti looks forward to working with a variety of artists and disciplines, and is committed to being part of an experimental new music movement in Australia.

The show in the National Museum of Singapore in September this year was the duo's first Asian event, but it can only be the start of an exciting new journey of exploration in the East.

For more on the Glass Percussion Project, visit <http://www.glasspercussionproject.com>.

For more information on shows at the National Museum of Singapore, visit <http://www.nationalmuseum.sg>



CREATIVE FORAYS: Miles and Ughetti. PHOTO: COURTESY THE GLASS PERCUSSION PROJECT

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