

TO PAINT, IN SONIC COLORS

At Wellesley College, an audiovisual experience inspired by Sylvia Plath

At the heart of a campus of barren trees and snow-covered hills, Jenny Olivia Johnson, a composer and assistant professor of music at Wellesley College, brings new life to the past with her latest sound installation, "Glass Heart (bells for Sylvia Plath)."

In tandem with an audiovisual exhibit in the college's Davis Museum, Johnson's composition, "Glass Heart and other stories," was recently performed at the college's Houghton Chapel along with four of her chamber compositions.

Inspired by her own experiences with trauma and memory as well as works by artist Sol LeWitt and poet Sylvia Plath, most famous for her novel, "The Bell Jar," and suicide soon after its publication, the Feb. 23 performance was a spectacle that felt like a wonderfully tragic entanglement of the senses.

Johnson's "Glass Heart (bells for Sylvia Plath)" audiovisual installation is showcased in the Davis Museum's Sight and Sound Gallery, and was curated by Elaine Mehalakes. It consists of seven amplified glass bell jars of varying sizes that respond to touch in modes of both light and sound, as well as prints of LeWitt's artwork from the suite "All Combinations of Red, Yellow, and Blue, with Scribbles."

"Our Sight and Sound Gallery" said Mehalakes, "has always been a place where we explore space through visual art and music. We wanted something



At Wellesley College's Davis Museum, a visitor walks through the "Glass Heart (bells for Sylvia Plath)" audiovisual installation in the Sights & Sounds gallery. PHOTO BY TAYLOR MARKARIAN

that would establish an intimate connection, and that's where Jenny came in."

Noting the various haunting, meditative sounds circling about the room and the richly colored prints on the walls, Mehalakes said, "I thought it was a really great way to synthesize all of these distinct pieces of art."

The driving force behind this exhibition is the condition of synesthesia - a neurological condition in which one sense is perceived as if by another. In simple terms, synesthesia is the ability that most people describe as "hearing colors and seeing sounds."

"A lot of my academic research is about sound synesthesia, memory, and its relationship to early trauma," said Johnson before the performance. "I'm very interested in memory, and specifically imperfect memory - memories that haunt you like ghosts that return in the form of sounds."

"It's been a big project," said Johnson. "It's really a big culmination of what I've

been doing in the last three years I've been at Wellesley. It's been emotionally difficult but very rewarding."

Sitting pensively for a moment, Johnson said, "Sylvia Plath was a big figure in my musical imagination. I feel her ghost."

Johnson worked with friends and musicians and artists Eliko Akahori and Jenny Tang (piano/synthesizer) Andrew Delclos (bassoon), Lucy McVeigh (soprano), Laura Moran (video art and lighting), David Russell (cell), Aaron Sheehan (tenor) to present this brilliant experience in both musical and visual art. The combination of artistic media allowed the audience to perceive with the mind of a person with synesthesia.

"Glass Heart (bells for Sylvia Path)"

WHEN Through June 9
WHERE Davis Museum at Wellesley College, 106 Central St., Wellesley
INFO 781-283-2051, www.davismuseum.wellesley.edu