

Murray Guy

453 West 17 Street New York NY 10011 T: +1 212 463 7372 F: +1 212 463 7319 info@murrayguy.com

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“Sergei Tcherepnin creates works for the senses at MIT”
MIT List Visual Arts Center
By Cate McQuaid

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Sergei Tcherepnin holds a length of copper, shaped like a tongue, for his sculptural sound installation at MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge. Wendy Maeda / Globe Staff

Metal mouths gape open, and brass tongues loll out.

“I think of them as Venus flytraps,” says their maker, artist Sergei Tcherepnin. “They’re quiet until you touch the tongue.”

Their sound, he says, “is between machine and animal voices.”

The mouths are just one component of Tcherepnin’s sculptural sound installation, opening July 15 at MIT List Visual Arts Center. “List Projects: Sergei Tcherepnin” also comprises a floor outfitted with six transducers that transform it into a speaker; several lengths of brass and copper in the shape of tongues, extending from the floor and wall; and steel boxes. All emit sounds: knocks, groans, stutters, and more musical bits. Several can be played with.

It’s early July, and Tcherepnin is padding around the installation in a T-shirt, shorts, and gray-striped socks, still making decisions about what to include, and how to use each piece. There was a giant tongue he thought he might leave silent. He debated on whether to use sounds that utilize the beating frequency — a wah-wah you hear when two notes played at once are out of tune.

Listening to them, he says, “You get seasick within 10 seconds.”

He played one on his computer. It sounded and felt like standing beside a foghorn at full blast, but in short spurts it was more ominous than sickening. He thought he might keep them.

He squatted by one brass tongue on the floor and revealed its connection to a synthesizer nearby. He

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turned the music on — a sweet little riff — then picked up the tongue and bent it. The music seemed to bend along with it.

The giant brass tongue, which may or may not remain silent, will project from the wall, with its tip resting on the floor. “It sounds incredibly brassy,” Tcherepnin says, “as if you were sitting inside a brass tunnel.”

The generic title “List Projects: Sergei Tcherepnin” does little to describe the installation, which has its own name: “Subharmonic Lick Thicket.” “Subharmonic” refers to the undertone scale, a descending scale that is the mirror image of the harmonic scale, to which most Western music is tuned. It’s minor and moody.

“I like the idea of the subharmonic,” Tcherepnin says. “And then there’s this floor. A change in perspective to below.”

When he “plays” the floor, it’s the sound of wood being pounded, loudly, now and then, and throughout the room. It startles, again and again.

“This is the most extreme in terms of volume,” Tcherepnin says. The beats resound up through your feet, and ring through your body to the top of your head. “I like how simple it is. Playing with the idea that something is trying to come out of the floor.”

Sound resonating through the body is a Tcherepnin specialty. In 2012, for a piece at Issue Project Room in New York, he outfitted visitors with transducers on their heads, chests, and waists.

“You hear [the composition] through your own bone conduction, and it is being amplified by your body,” he explains. He has investigated the possibility of creating chairs that would have a similar effect, but the cost of filling a performance space with seats like that would be prohibitive, he says.

Flesh and bone play a vital part in experiencing “Subharmonic Lick Thicket,” says List assistant curator Alise Upitis, who organized the show.

Music, Upitis says, is algorithmic, like “a chess game — many possibilities for moves, but all predetermined. Music is seen as infinite predetermined options.”

She looks around the evolving installation. “With this, everybody has a different body mass, a different body shape, and everyone will interact with it differently. The options are unlimited because it’s analog, as opposed to infinite because it’s digital.”

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The viewer's experience of the space is also vital. Earlier this year, for the 2014 Whitney Biennial, Tcherepnin installed transducers in the light fixtures in the Whitney Museum of American Art's lobby, mixing synthesizer music with harpsichord tones. The space became a place to pause and listen.

A New Yorker now, Tcherepnin, 32, grew up in Watertown, part of a long line of musical luminaries. His great-grandfather Nikolai composed and conducted for Diaghilev's Ballet Russes. His grandfather Alexander was also a composer. His father, Ivan, ran the electronic music studio at Harvard (where he composed a piece based on the subharmonic scale). Ivan's brother, Serge, invented the Serge Modular synthesizer in the 1970s, the analog, modular synthesizer Tcherepnin uses in this work. His brother, Stefan, is also an artist and composer.

Tcherepnin takes a cue from his uncle's instrument. The modular synthesizer features separate modules that can be patched together, just as the pieces in "Subharmonic Lick Thicket" play separately, but connect.

He uses the individual sound objects to choreograph the visitor's experience. "It's not necessarily immersive, not all the sound everywhere. It's about an active sense of space and an active sense of listening," he says. "You hear one thing, and it signals how to enter the piece."

While Tcherepnin has taken cues from his father and his uncle, he also sees his work as a response, in part, to other composers of their generation, such as Max Neuhaus and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

"This idea of pure sound — there's something essentialist about early '60s music and sound experiments. I'm interested in questioning that. Shifting perspectives. Fracturing this idea of one unified experience," he says. "I'm interested in making these things more personal."

Wandering around the exhibition space, he strategizes about where to place the sculptures, sonically and visually. Big squares of fabric line the wall and floor, and make the installation feel cozy, despite the sometimes frightening sounds it emits.

"I want my work to be a real experience," Tcherepnin says.

You'll know it's real, because you'll feel it in your bones.