

Sergei Tcherepnin

MIT List Visual Arts Center /
Cambridge (MA)

The fitful relationship between cause and effect moves through different phases in the sound-based art of Sergei Tcherepnin. Between the two distinctions, first there's disregard, then devotion — and then a kind of reverence, discernible to those keyed to the right frequency, in which all levels of inattention and engagement serenely coexist. Competing senses of surprise and expectation figure in all of Tcherepnin's handlings of sound, and especially so in "Subharmonic Lick Thicket," his show at the List Center at MIT.

All observers, whether they know it or not, are indeed keyed to the right frequency. Tucked away in an intimate room, the exhibit plays with sounds sourced from the inner ear, where noises are taken in as external materials and assessed in ways that transfigure them into bodily forces. For all of us, the architecture of the ear itself works to amplify and alter sound, making the sounds we hear different, at least a little bit, from what actually served as the original stimulus.

Reveling in the mysticism and plain strangeness of this is key to Tcherepnin's art. As has become his custom, Tcherepnin outfitted the room with homely abstract objects, mostly metal sheets cut into endearing biomorphic forms and hung jutting off the wall or else placed on the floor. Some are boxes that can be opened or folded, like Lygia Clark's "Bichos" critter sculptures, and others are rounded fragments that look like so many tongues protruding into the space.

From all of those, electronic sounds emit, with no clear connection between what can be seen and what can be heard, if in fact there is any connection at all. Touch one of the objects, however — bend or torque or get one of the tongues wagging — and the sound shifts by way of transducers hooked up to transform each object into a sort of speaker. Sometimes the shift in sounds is subtle and other times it's drastic, and before long it only makes sense to "play" the room simply by moving around it and engaging it on its own unearthly terms.

by Andy Battaglia