

The sound of silence: Nothing Hear by Phoebe Rathmell

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By Lauren Carroll Harris

What does silence look like? The 21st Century is a rowdy time and place and listening to it is exhausting. The boom never ends, everything is noise and everywhere is somewhere to listen.

Rathmell's art is a meditation on meditation, with this latest exhibition honing in on the sound of silence. Sound, of course, has traditionally been the domain of musicians, and silence is a particular sound American composer and musician John Cage made tangible and present - a real thing to be held and treasured - in his "4'33". That piece was intended to force audiences to listen to their daily surrounds with the same sustained attention usually reserved for the likes of concertos. What they heard was not blankness, but loaded sonic emptiness; not silence but the shuffles and heartbeats in the room it was performed in. The composition was not unwritten, merely noteless.

Rathmell does the same by transforming the artmaking process into a form of meditation. Creating ephemeral and sculptural installations, she has previously shaped overlooked functional objects, like dyed toothpicks, with her hands in concentric circles and mounds on the gallery floor.

Where the aim of so many artworks is to train us in how to *look* at the world, Rathmell's lesson is to retrain us in how to listen. However, though they force the audience to interact with the gallery space, as installations, the works in *Nothing Hear* do not move toward the audience but toward the artist's creative self. Rathmell's art practice continues her meditation practice, something she has been doing for twelve years. A set of rhythms punctuate both practices: ravel and unravel, push and pile, exhale and inhale. The mark is made, then unmade at the exhibition's conclusion, when the work ceases to be. These are works of balance and consideration: there is none of this mania for complication that so often passes for sophistication, just a coexisting simplicity and complexity created by the repetition of movement.

Rathmell's silence is not void but productive, and her meditation as a mode of performance is generative. If the goal of meditation is to think more about less and to rise above the fray, in Rathmell's twin practices, that goal returns to the basic mandate that many artists profess to: changing the way we perceive and relate to everyday life, through contemporary art.

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