

ARTFORUM

Alison O'Daniel

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Alison O'Daniel, *Night Sky*, 2011, stills from a color film in HD, 75 minutes.

Alison O'Daniel works across disciplines, combining sculpture, sound, painting, performance, and films with live accompaniment. Her seventy-five minute film Night Sky recently premiered at Anthology Film Archives as part of Performa 11 and the exhibition "Walking Forward-Running Past" at Art in General. The film will screen Sunday, January 29, in Los Angeles as part of Liz Glynn's Black Box, a performance art festival afterparty for "Pacific Standard Time."

SOUND IS A CHARACTER IN MY LATEST FILM, which features a story of two girls traveling into the desert. Their car breaks down and they encounter a small portal made out of a Hula-Hoop hovering in the sublime landscape of the desert. When they reach into it, they discover a dance marathon happening on the other side. Other narratives are at play—road movies, buddy films, sci-fi and queer narratives—but the language of the film emerges around the ambiguous relationship between these girls, one of whom is deaf.

The film is full of synaesthetic experiences of sound where, for example, a light flashes in the desert and is transferred through the sound of bells or water. There are also elements where sound either breaks down or emerges in strange phenomenological ways in a sort of reimagining of what sound is. For instance, a dance marathon features the Los Angeles-based duo Lucky Dragons, who often make music by having their audience members touch cords they've engineered. I wanted to work with Lucky Dragons as their work addresses the relationship of the body to making sound. In the film, their speakers break down, forcing the dance marathon contestants to continue dancing—but in silence. As they dance, the girls' car simultaneously breaks down in the desert.

I started out with the goal of making a film that was accessible in different ways to both a hearing audience and a deaf audience. I had particular ideas about who should be included in the cast and crew, which are made up of both deaf and hearing individuals, as well as performance artists, such as the filmmaker Cauleen Smith and Joanne Karl, who runs the Integratron, a sound chamber–meditation space in Joshua Tree, which is also the main location in the film. Due to the combination of people with different abilities and backgrounds all working together, a lot of interesting elements emerged. When working with an interpreter to write the score in sign language, we were considerate of what it means to explain music to a deaf person. We didn't want to just describe, "Oh this is a synthesizer, and this is what a synthesizer does." Instead, through metaphor, we aimed to describe the relationships between emotions, physics, instrumentation, the body, and even sound design.

When I screen the film I like to have two versions of live accompaniment. One is a pretty standard live music score performed either by the composer, Ethan Frederick Greene, or by local musicians. The other version is a retooling of that score through sign language. As the hearing audience encounters an unknown language representing music, their relationship to the score is disabled. Instead of listening, they're able to watch the score unfold through choreography and movement. Simultaneously, the deaf audience is given an unusual amount of access to the score through an abstracted, poetic description of music.

It's important to note that I am partially deaf, wear hearing aids, and lip-read. I occupy this strange in-between space. I grew up in the hearing world, but have always found myself just slightly outside of understanding what is going on; as a child, this caused a sense of wonder that has continually evolved. Not having access to everything creates a space for transcendence, and out of that a language of abstraction can emerge, and sound becomes profound. This sort of approach also extends into the material I work with. My background is in materials and performance—I was a figure skater and studied fibers as an undergrad—and I have a very tactile and physical relationship to the score itself. When I start writing or creating a narrative, I always start with a list of elements that I want to be in the film. Then I play a game of connecting the dots between these things, writing scores based on chance operations, almost like an exquisite corpse game. In some ways I'm creating a map to follow.

— *As told to Natilee Harren*