

Broad Street Review

Wednesday, July 1, 2009

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Hidden Cities Arts Festival

BY: [A.J. Sabatini](#) 06.29.2009



Shiloh Baptist Church interior: Location trumps everything. (Photo: A.J. Sabatini.)

The recent Hidden Cities Arts Festival is an art experience that's about much more than the effect of individual work. It also exemplifies the sort of current socially immersed art that's too often hidden in favor of showier work.

Hidden Cities Arts Festival. Through June 2009 at various locations in Philadelphia.

www.hiddencityphila.org.

Sonambulo (1998-2009), by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, at Shiloh Baptist

Church, 2040 Christian St. inigomanglano-ovalle.com. *Running True*, by John Phillips and Carolyn Healy, at Disston Saw Works, 6795 State Rd. terragizmo.net/Healy&Phillips/H&P-Installations.html

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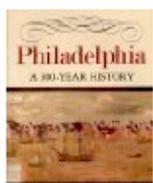


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If these walls could talk (and this month, they did)

A.J. SABATINI

If you've visited any of the Hidden Cities installations or attended performances at the festival's various local sites, you quickly realize that the entire project is characterized by substantive research. The very concept of Hidden Cities involved researching little known— or, in a few cases, virtually closed— locations and landmarks in Philadelphia. For artists commissioned to work in these sites – such as Mother Bethel AME Church, which was an Underground Railroad stopover for escaped slaves— research seemed imperative to create work that responded to, underscored or accentuated each place's history, architecture and local community.

Collectively, these works are impressively attentive to sounds, designs, archives, historical contexts and the idiosyncrasies of the spaces themselves. For example, *Battle Hymns*, in the Armory of the First Troop Philadelphia City Calvary, began and ended with a solo rider on horseback slowly circling near the entrance of the block-long structure. The clapping of the horse's hoofs on the concrete floor set the tone for a work for chorus and dancers that echoed a long legacy of military actions: maneuvers, processions, speeches, departures, prayers, hymns, funerals.

I call the efforts of these artists "aesthetic research." Hidden Cities reveals



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itself as a whole: from the site selection process to the projects' conception to the program notes, websites and finally the works themselves. This is the type of art experience that is about much more than the effect of individual work. It also exemplifies the sort of current socially immersed art that is too often hidden in favor of showier work.

The sound of bullets

Two of the most stunning Hidden Cities installations present dramatically opposed approaches. For *Sonambulo (1998-2009)*— which means *sleepwalker* in Spanish— the Chicago artist Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle took over a dark, empty back room on the third floor of Shiloh Baptist Church at 2040 Christian Street. The rooms in this old building have been used for many purposes since it was built in the 1860s. The washed-out tiles on one wall form a seven-pronged candleholder, and the program notes indicate that this was once a room for Boy Scouts.

Here Manglano-Ovalle installed two speakers in the shadowy corners of the L-shaped room and another in a coffin-like closet. Frayed wire cords hang from the ceiling with blackened metal lamp covers tilting from a few; other cords are tied in careless nooses. The glazed windows on one side of the room fog the light into a leaden grey even on the brightest days. Every 11 minutes, a recorded gunshot jarringly punctuates the airless space and, no matter where you stand, the shot is in your ear, surrounds your body, spreads all around you. Gunshots in this and nearby neighborhoods are all too common, you remind yourself.

Then, the sounds of thunder and rain follow. You walk around. The sounds of wind push the rain. I was thinking of Dylan's song, *A Hard Rain is Gonna Fall*, when some people came, chatting at first. On the way out of the building, a pamphlet on a rack caught my eye. Printed in blue, it read, "Anchors in the Storm."

A Machine Age wonder

By contrast, John Phillips and Carolyn Healy— two underacknowledged Philadelphia treasures — were given the task of representing the glory, demise and sociohistorical saga of the still-functioning 40-acre industrial site of the Disston Saw Works in Philadelphia's Tacony section. The Saw Works, opened in 1870, is a Machine Age wonder, with a sprawling, fenced-in maze of vast dusty warehouses, workshops like airplane hangers, hippopotamus-sized machinery, and spark-flying operations. It once employed 7,000 workers and is now down to 200, some of whom were filmed at work and feature in projections on the walls of the barnlike building where *Running True*, the museum-scale installation by Phillips and Healy, takes place.

This spectacular *mise en scène*— a maximalist celebration of materiality, industrial might, sound, light, action, aesthetic research in performance and multi-media art— displayed the entire history of Disston and the Tacony community. Disston manufactures metal discs and circular saw blades, some up to six feet in diameter. It's a complicated process that involves iron, fire in truck-sized kilns, massive presses, and an armory of forging tools. But for all the industrial gigantism and obvious backbreaking human labor involved, the process also requires exacting measurement, calculated timing, flawless temperature control, choreographed engineering and expert craftsmanship at every stage.

The faded script of old ledger books

The Phillips-Healy installation— part stage set, part phantasmagorical homage, part archival unveiling, part socioeconomic study— highlights everything from the faded black script in century-old ledger books to a panoramic video of the Tacony area projected on a blueprint doubling as a screen. The digitalized soundscape and pinpoint lighting subtly mesh contemporary technology with its forerunner, metallurgical science. All the elements are arrayed in more or less discrete sections that allow you to

walk around and observe the shapes of each tool and machine, the design of the sculpted stacks, the changing light and the relationships among the objects and projections.

These two Hidden Cities installations disclose knowledge you might have possessed all along, but not in the form that you experience inside of them. ♦

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