

REVIEW

LENA DALY: NIGHT BELL

SANTI VERNETTI — DECEMBER 30, 2016

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Lena Daly, *Instrument*, 2016. UV-reactive paint, phosphorescent powder, flock, UV-reactive water, uranium glass and wood pedestal, 53.75 x 20 x 9 in. Courtesy of Various Small Fires

Lena Daly: [*Night Bell*](#)

Various Small Fires

812 North Highland Avenue

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I'm 13 years old, hiding behind a big fiberglass rock. The smell of mint flavored fog juice fills the air. Electric blue, radioactive pink, and hot Day-Glo lime paint is flung over every surface in this lazer tag arena somewhere along the shore boardwalk in Wildwood New Jersey. The Prodigy's *Voodoo People* blares out of the PA so thunderously I barely hear Kevin slide up next to me under the black lights. He flashes a crooked smile and jiggles his eye brows. "You take the right side of the mini trampolines!" he says. "Leave Steve's sister to me!" I close my eyes and jump over the foam pit. PEW, PEW, ZAP!



Lena Daly, Uneasy Listening, 2015. UV-reactive chalk on vinyl inkjet print, wood, UV light, 34.5 x 49 x 49 in. Courtesy of Various Small Fires

The color palette of Lena Daly's first solo show in Los Angeles at Various Small Fires, *Night Bell*, is hauntingly familiar to my generation. We grew up during a time when the fear of nuclear annihilation gave way to the commercialization of the post-apocalypse and its radioactivity sheen. Cosmic bowling, the Toxic Avenger, candy ravers, and Blue Razzberry slurpees. "Like, chill out Dad, can't you see how cool the end of the planet is going to be? Turn off the lights, tune out the news, and drop some MDMA. We're going out in a digital blaze, baby!"

To say that Light and Space art is a Southern Californian tradition is like saying you can find tacos and palm trees in and around Los Angeles. The two go hand in hand. At first, Daly's exhibition looks like your quintessential Light and Space installation, but slowly reveals itself to be more like some odd inversion of the reality you just left behind. Like an immersive film negative. As if some mad scientist had switched all the cones in our eyes overnight. Then at the the first doorway you are literally hit with a noise. Highly directional ultrasonic speakers installed around the space offer a disquieting buzz all around the environment, but when you are in the path of their highly focused beams of sound you can feel the frequencies hitting your body with a startling sharpness. It's no surprise then that Daly's interest in these speakers comes directly out of research into military technologies that facilitate the weaponization of sound and light.

Everywhere in the show you find iridescent and luminescent materials sculpted onto photographs that wrap around smooth surface objects, glowing under two different kind of black light. There's a great deal of complication about what exactly the art objects are and what is merely display furniture or armature. Everything blends together, seamlessly, even unnervingly. Two videos project onto pedestals that contain flocked silhouettes of their shadow images the glass objects they support. If that's not confusing enough, the two kinds of blacklight also produce different color shadows on that walls whose gradients cross over each other and mix along the floor and ceiling. There, glass objects are mostly antique uranium glassware that the artist has collected. Their radioactivity glows brightly in the space, but I've been assured by the artist and gallery that careful geiger counter readings have been taken, and that no artwork in the room is any more radioactive than the smartphone in my pocket. This is not exactly a comforting notion, but I soon find myself less concerned with the radioactivity of my own personal technology as I become delightfully overwhelmed by the phenomenal world I've stepped into. Looking closer at the objects I discover charmingly wonky glass bowls (or bells) made by the artist scattered amongst the found objects. They have been filled with precise amounts of water which give the bowls a specific musical note when played the way one would a glass harmonica. These bells were played and recorded by Daly, and their sounds are fed back into the exhibition via hidden speakers within some of the pedestals. At this point I could go on describing the other points of feedback looping, and the careful folding over of space, representation, and projection that Daly has orchestrated for us, but words will do very little justice to being in the space experiencing the ebbing layers and sound and vision. What I can do here is point out what the self-referential and reflexive video in the main room produces in the viewer. *Trix R,G,B*, 2016, arguably the main event here, produce in me a very strange and playful, but suspensefully dark anxiety. The video is a static projection of the very objects that they are being projected upon. So, the sculptures and found objects in the video installations function not only as props and staging for the video's *mise en scène*, but they also act as their own projection "screens" or surfaces. I know, stay with me. In the video there is one element that is not immediately visible in the room: the artist. The video includes images of Daly hiding behind these very objects and interacting with them as if this were all a bizarre hallucinatory puppet theater. This leads one to question, where is Daly in the real? Is she here hiding behind one of her sculptures? Is she behind you, waiting for the right moment to reach out her hand and touch you? Freaky.



Lena Daly, Battery No. 2, 2016. UV-reactive vinyl inkjet print, UV-reactive paint, wood, phosphorescent powder, resin and UV light, 29 x 28 x 16 in. Courtesy of Various Small Fires

All in all this is not the typically superficial Southern California contemporary Light and Space show you see popping up everywhere since PST. This is an eerie psychological space for aesthetic experimentation that probes multiples histories. At times these histories are domestically personal ones (as in the uranium glassware) and at other times they are more public, more technological (the ultrasonic speakers). I resist the urge to hide behind one of the objects myself, in attempt to relive the rush of my first lazer tag experience. Instead I take away with me the Daly invitation to get a little lost for a bit in the aesthetic experience, so that in the conditions therein produced, I might discover something about myself, or my world, that I wasn't expecting.