

Eggs and Elephants

BY KYLE GANN

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Detail from the Gwiazda installation at the Cincinnati College Conservatory

illustration: Henry Gwiazda

CINCINNATI—Chimes ring like a doorbell, but with the wrong interval. You hear crunching noises, and then seagulls, though you don't see any animal life at all. Instead, you see a gigantic egg arising from a calm sea. A moment of jazz drumming erupts, accompanying a pair of huge rocks balanced on a tiny platform. Then, in one of the few moments of audiovisual synchronicity, the sounds of gunfire burst out as a panoply of colorful geometric shapes explodes out of the sea.

I came here to experience Henry Gwiazda's new computer installations at the Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music (October 20 to 21) because I consider Gwiazda the Conlon Nancarrow of my generation, working with unusual technology under conditions that make his work difficult to present. Just as you used to have to fly to Mexico City to hear Nancarrow's player-piano pieces "live," I've given up waiting for Gwiazda's work to come to New York, and travel to wherever he gets to show it. Some of his work in virtual audio can be presented only to one person at a time. A piece like *buzzingreynold'sdreamland*, included in this show (and also available on an Innova CD), draws acoustic illusions in space, making basketballs bounce past you and seagulls (again) swoop overhead—but you have to be a pretty exact distance from the two loudspeakers for the illusions to work.

For the last few years, however, Gwiazda has put virtual audio on the back burner in an attempt to add video to his vocabulary. He still wants the works heard and viewed by only one person at a time, in intimate circumstances, and his music aspires to the condition of reading, something one does privately. Because he's more interested in making connections to the other arts than to

anyone else's music, his music occupies a space all its own. Painting, for example, interests him immensely, and his videos look like surrealist paintings come to life. Especially Giorgio de Chirico's; if you can imagine one of that painter's flat, colorful, mysterious, and unpeopled landscapes awakening in movement, or yourself flying around in one of them, you can get an idea of what Gwiazda's videos are like.

And so, at the beginning of a piece called *these spatial bones scattered wide*, you find yourself in a pastel-hued landscape, confronting some huge object, maybe a rock. Suddenly you move toward the rock and see it up close; you go around it, and see that its overall shape wasn't at all what you expected. The rock changes color. Its hard surface evaporates to filmy transparency. Meanwhile, each object, each transformation, is paired with a sound: footsteps, a baby crying, lunchroom chatter, foghorns, a harp glissando. There are no animate forms on the screen, but each object is somehow animated by the sound that goes with it, presented in tandem irrelevantly but convincingly, and with an absurdity the surrealists would have relished. Gwiazda calls himself the only surrealist composer, and challenges me to name another. There are certainly Dada composers like Satie, Cage, Nam June Paik, but he's stumped me.

So watching *these spatial bones* is sort of like playing the computer game *Myst* if it had been designed by Salvador Dalí and René Magritte. The other new work, the one I started off this article with, is *dust in the ochre of this work*, which is more continuous in its movement. Here, shapes morph in and out of each other; you find yourself looking out through cylinders and climbing spiral staircases as vibraphones ping and elephants honk behind you. The technical expertise is impressive, but the results are endearingly vulnerable, the combinations of noise and image childlike, carefully calibrated but unsystematic.

Gwiazda has always worked with unaltered samples from sound-effects CDs; now, for the visual element, he's mastered landscape-design software. A high-tech artist with poetic, low-tech sensibilities, he inhabits an American tradition I see as beginning with Henry Cowell, by which the artist devotes tremendous theoretical ingenuity to the structuring of musical materials, but then paints with those materials in a whimsical and intuitive manner. Like Cowell, Harry Partch, and Nancarrow, Gwiazda creates systems, but plays freely within those systems. Why *this* sound with *that* image? There's never a reason, but the elements of Gwiazda's wacky, rhapsodic world make their own kind of sense.

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