

Words Belied by Music

BY KYLE GANN

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Rob Reich on guitar and Corey Dargel on piano, joined by magician Yvan Greenberg
photo: Hiroyuki Ito

I hope I never become an old curmudgeon, reflexively dismissive of the younger generation. The unsettling truth, though, is that I find a lot of twentysomething composers eerily conservative, seemingly unaware of the last 25 years of new music and writing works that could have come from the 1970s or earlier. For one thing, most colleges won't expose them to any music past Boulez and Carter. But that wasn't true at Oberlin, my alma mater, and it's not true either of Corey Dargel and Rob Reich, two composers recently graduated from Oberlin whom I discovered on lecture trips back there, and who teamed up for a May 30 debut at the Knitting Factory.

Reich plays guitar, Dargel plays piano and sings, and their show consisted entirely of songs. Most of these were based on repeated texts so brief that I could take down every word—for example, "Sometimes I think about leaving"; "I hate myself more than you could imagine"; "Why don't you stay awhile and think about the times we had that weren't as bad as the times we had that were." Reiterated with deadpan insistence (though not unmusically) over upbeat accompaniments in innocent major tonalities, the words ceased to have conventional expressive value and became objects of contemplation. Concentrate on them, though, and you'd miss the subtleties that kept the "repetitions" from ever being the same twice.

In song after song, Reich and Dargel seemed to play phrases of freely different lengths in skewed meters (11/8 was popular) without much listening to each other. But somehow their final phrases ended abruptly together every time, suggesting that some rhythmic sleight of hand was used to

keep us from noticing how intricate these seemingly simple songs were. David Garland's early pieces, though more outwardly emotive, have the same rhythmic inventiveness, and those of Frankie Mann (another Oberlin grad, my generation) offer the same deadpan irony. But the more obvious comparison is to the late Arthur Russell, who in the '80s accompanied himself on the cello while singing songs in which cello and voice seemed utterly independent until the unexpected final note. It's a strong, if rarely celebrated, postminimalist song tradition, and Dargel and Reich bring to it an upbeat yet thoughtful new approach. Let's hope New York hears more of them.

Eleven days later, Martha Mooke and Randy Hudson, who call their duo Bowing, aimed at a smoother blend in a regrettably underattended concert at Exit Art. Mooke, who played solo for the first half, used to play a blue electric viola and now plays a red one, but the striking contrast with her white hair remains the same. By looping and pitch-bending herself via foot pedals she creates an entire string quartet without assistance. This means that all of her music turns on the device of the ostinato, the repeating loop, though when she wants to, she can so obscure that device that we don't notice it. Joining her on electric guitar, Hudson relied more on delay units, setting up textures of quickly repeating figures that blended with Mooke's ostinatos.

Bowing's music, and Mooke's soloing as well, have plenty of what I call negative virtues: Nothing ever goes on too long, no effect is too obvious, every move is tasteful. Positive virtues—inspired images, elegant structures—are present, but less uniformly. If these works were an accurate indication, Mooke's music has gotten darker and thicker than it used to be, and has given up the Terry Riley-ish spaciness it once had. *After the Fall* was dense and mournful, like Harold Budd, and in *Virtual Corridors* she played over dissonantly intertwined ostinatos. In older works she made the viola sound like electric guitar and train whistles, while Hudson's cascading echoes reminded me of Robert Fripp's "Frippertronics" of the late '70s (which Fripp ripped off from Riley somewhat).

If the sonic images were precise, the forms were agreeably loose, making each piece feel like a sonic landscape: Sometimes desert imperceptibly morphed into forest; other times, at the push of a foot pedal, we'd turn a corner and suddenly encounter a completely different vista. And despite the jazz licks and odd meters, Mooke never had to worry about straying too far from romanticism: By nature the viola carries its romanticism along with it.

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