Cooper Baker melds computer technology and sound art to striking results

Cooper Baker and “Giant Spectrum”

Photo by Dan Allen

Despite a title that sounds like a college town reggae festival, ***Sweet Gongs Vibrating*** might be the San Diego Art Institute's most engaging exhibition since introducing its Curator-in-Residence program more than a year ago. Amanda Cachia has assembled a fine selection of local and regional artists whose work

extends beyond the usual ocular-centric mediums. Whether it's Brian Goeltzenleuchter's sweet smelling olfactory works, Stefani Byrd's "DIVA: ReDux" video installation or Aren Skalman's circular wooden noisemakers, the show is filled with art where simply seeing it is almost secondary.

The standout of the show, however, has to be **Cooper Baker**'s "Giant Spectrum," a nearly four-foot aluminum and plastic light sculpture that responds to the noise of the room. Stand next to it silently and it will pick up the viewer's slightest movements. Make a bunch of noise and the plastic, vacuformed lights start to sporadically flash. For Baker, who uses computer coding in his works to achieve these interactive effects, "Giant Spectrum" has been a piece he's envisioned doing for years, but was limited by both technology and his own computer skills.

"Part of it is definitely the technology or more of a facility with the technology," Baker says. "As I've become a better programmer I've been able to accomplish more things artistically."

The Linda Vista resident grew up in Oregon playing violin and originally had dreams of becoming a classical violinist before discovering computer music in 2001, while a student at the California Institute of the Arts. This eventually led him to UC San Diego in 2008 to pursue a Ph.D. in computer music. There he says he was playing improvised music with other musicians while also developing his own music software.

"When I was doing this solo music, it usually involved sound as well as some kind of visual element," Baker says. "Things like animated wave forms or video signals that were designed to create musical tones."

One of his first works, suitably entitled "Car Alarm," was essentially a car alarm kit and a cargo van taillight that Baker fashioned into a sampler-style musical instrument. The seven-foot "Giant Meter" from 2010 could be seen as a precursor to "Giant Spectrum." Seven recycled stoplight bulbs, stacked vertically, light up as the sound in the room increased. Still, the piece now seems quaint compared to the 49 lights of "Spectrum."

"I've always thought it would be so neat to have a big thing on the wall that showed the spectrum of sound," Baker says. "This show was a great opportunity to do it and by this point, I had learned what I needed to do to program microchips and weld aluminum and all the things that came together to make it happen. For me, it's a satisfying thing to see it hanging there."