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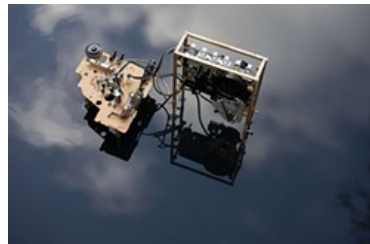
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Sculptor Evan Holm Goes to the Edge

By Jonathan Curriel
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In his Oakland studio just minutes from the Bay Bridge toll plaza, Evan Holm shows a visitor a long, strange contraption that includes unspooled cassette tape, large wooden wheels, small metal rotors, oak branches, and pools of water. The sculpture is designed to push the tape through the air and into the pools, where the tape is submerged and then continues on its way, all the while playing overlapping music that evokes nature at its most sublime. Holm calls his new artwork *Forest Pools*, and it arrives a few years after another audio sculpture, *Submerged Turntable*, played vinyl albums under water that resembled a mini-lake.



COURTESY OF DEREK SCHOONMAKER
Detail from *Forest Pools*

"Evan Holm: the river made no sound" through June 27 at Vessel Gallery, 471 25th St., Oakland. Free; 510-893-8800 or vessel-gallery.com. Holm performs at the gallery May 21, 6-8 p.m., and gives a talk June 13, 2 p.m.

In the long timeline of "experimental art" that involves sound or nature — including John Cage's 1952 composition of silence, "4'33"," and Christo's 1976 *Running Fence*, which snaked through Marin and Sonoma counties for miles — the 35-year-old Holm is a worthy torchbearer. Holm has both art and engineering backgrounds, and his sculptures let him deconstruct and glorify analog objects that the digital revolution is sweeping aside. Faster is always better in the digital world; for Holm, slower is more interesting and much more beautiful. With *Forest Pools*, Holm frees the cassette tape from its commercial casing, then exposes it to the elements — including black ink, which Holm will add to the water when *Forest Pools* debuts at Oakland's Vessel Gallery on May 21 in an exhibit titled "the river made no sound."

Seen from above, Holm's sculptures are akin to Rube Goldberg constructions, but Holm's art is more about inspiring wonder at the mechanics of sound, movement, time, and nature than about entertaining an audience. *Forest Pools* has 23 water arenas, three pairs of oversized wheels, and three loops of tape, each about 140 feet — almost the length of an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

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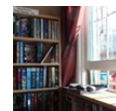
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Besides Forest Pools, "the river made no sound" features Cloud/Clock, which also incorporates wooden wheels and audio tape — but also 600 pounds of flour that cascades, snowlike, over the sculpture from a latticework and bunches into piles on the ground below. The audio for Cloud/Clock is a cacophony of elliptical sounds that, like the Beatles song "Revolution 9," seem like a series of eavesdropped conversations and staged performances. The Beatles' "Revolution 9" came out in 1968, at the height of the group's artistic and spiritual growth. Holm's art has a similar mystical dimension, but it doesn't proselytize — viewers can interpret the works as they want.

Where Cloud/Clock is, in Holm's view, "subdued and quiet," Forest Pools has a bigger sound system, a higher volume, and is anchored by electronic music — "heavy on the bass," notes Holm, "but not like club electronic. It will be earthy and soulful."

Holm will play a live set with Forest Pools at the exhibit's May 21 opening, acting like a DJ as he mixes in music to accompany the music of the sculpture. A cellist, a vocalist, and a backup vocalist (Holm's partner) will accompany Holm, performing electronic versions of such songs as Mavis Staples' "Holy Ghost" and Nina Simone's "Feeling Good." Each song references rivers or water.

"Essentially," Holm says, "we're going to sing love songs to the river."

It would be easy to reduce Holm's art to caricature — to suggest that Holm is a kind of New Agey California artist who has spent way too much time in his Oakland studio. Cage and Christo were lambasted — but by casual observers who never actually studied the work. As documented in Albert and David Maysles' 1978 film *Running Fence*, one mean-spirited observer told a crowd of onlookers about Christo's work, "That's art? Some lousy curtain coming through here with a bunch of city-slickers looking at it? To hell with it. I'm against it. I think it's stupid. ... What art is that, hanging a piece of rag up for 50 miles? I can hang a rag up. I bet he can't even paint a picture!"

Holm's art won't inspire similar vitriol. And, besides, Holm can paint a picture, in addition to making museum-quality sculpture. In 2013, SFMOMA invited Holm to demonstrate Submerged Turntable at the museum. With Forest Pools, the wheels transport the tape through the inky water, which ripples upon contact — just like the ripples that occurred in Submerged Turntable. As the tape continues through Forest Pools, the wheels get splashed with ink.

Of the simple cassette tape, which today costs the same price as a pack of gum, Holm says, "Unlike digital technology, a viewer can grasp on it and instantly know how it works. It's not obscured inside a computer. I find that alienating with digital technology. And with cassettes and turntables, there's a mechanical component that is spinning and moving, and I find that to be really engaging. And with cassettes, it's wonderful how it's essentially valueless material, but what's encoded on it (music, voices, etc.) is a beautiful art form. I love that tension."

As he pressed the tape with his fingers for a visitor, Holm said, "And the tension is expressed by the actual physical tension of this. Everyone who will see the show will be worried that the tape will break. I will, too. I'm pushing it to the edge. I'm very much pushing it to the edge."

Holm laughs, but says that any breakage will also be art. "If one of the cassette tracks snaps or falls off the wheel," he says, "I lose a third of the music. Although I hope that doesn't happen, that could be beautiful."

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Cage played with silence in "4'33"," which has a full orchestra sit on stage with their instruments and sheet music — with the audience's inadvertent sounds, like coughing and whispering, providing most of the piece's "notes." Cage was making a bigger point about the nature and definition of music. Holm's sculptures aren't easy listening. They are complicated assemblages, complete with blueprints, that go through repeated testing before they appear in public.

"It's fun," Holm says. "As far as I know, (Submerged Turntable) was the first and the only underwater record player. The world needed one. C'mon. That was a wonderful moment of discovery. It was magic. I had no idea it would work. But the sound did come out. And of course it took a lot of engineering to make it spot on. After I put records underwater, I thought maybe cassette tapes can go into the water, too."

They can. And, with Evan Holm, they do.

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