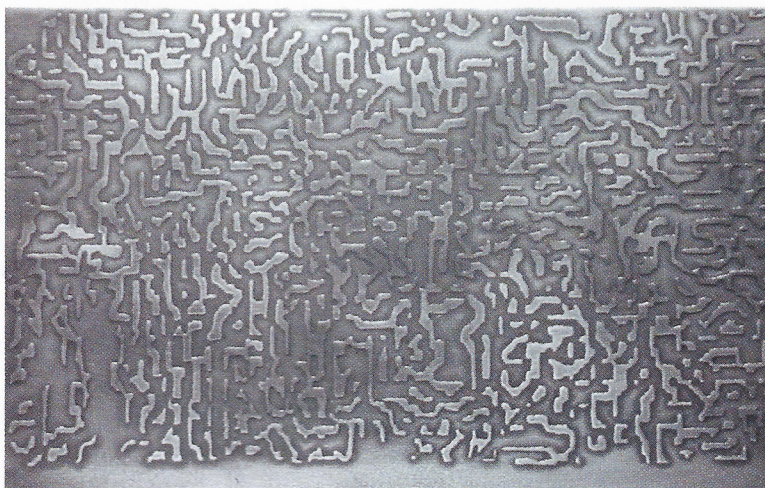


NATALIA BLANCH

JULIA FRIEDMAN GALLERY, 118 N. PEORIA ST., 60607 312/455-0755



WHAT DOES A BREATH LOOK LIKE? In her exhibition "The Writing of Sound," Natalia Blanch transmuted a murmuring voice into glowing steel slabs. In an effort that uses process and performance as much as a physical object to create her art, Blanch digitally recorded her voice as she read from various meditative and religious texts, then edited and transcribed the wave-like patterns created by a computer translating it into two-dimensional graphs on steel plates. She then handpainted over the patterns with asphalt and submerged the plates into an acid bath, which ate away the steel surrounding the paint. These runic hybrids—every square millimeter handled, scraped, brushed, etched, and polished by the artist into luminous metallic topographies of the immaterial—represent repeated translations between the body, the spirit, the digital world, and the world of objects. They are the human, inner voice of prayers and chants incorporated into a visceral physical world, sound made palpable, and they resonate with ancient associations of sound as a primordial, transformative, creative principle. Pythagoras, after all, postulated that all matter emanated from musical tones that ordinarily humans could not hear. And mystics, alchemists, musicians, and scientists have long suggested a connection between sound and physical reality, many arguing that the natural world falls into underlying organic and geometric forms because of elemental but inaudible waves of vibrations in the universe. "The Writing of Sound" falls into this tradition of metamorphosis. With its conflation of sound and the physical world, Blanch's work plays with and expands the definition of materiality itself by suggesting connections between the impermanent and what seems solidly present.

Constructing her mystical readings into metal forms was just the first phase for Blanch. In a reverse process, she then digitally scanned some of the steel slabs—all of which have the same title as her exhibition—back into another wave image. Through a computer program, she reconstructed the sound of her voice, grainy and metallic at this point, from the plates, recording it onto a compact disc. In an additional body of work, she meticulously handpainted the threads of the wave patterns with watercolor on paper. Like the book of alchemy *La Via Del Fuego*, from which she chanted for this work (she also read from the Bible and *Machzar*, a book of Jewish

mysticism), Blanch's art is alchemical, changing lead into gold and then back again as she negotiates this gliding between media. It is this process of successive transformations that serves as her conceptual base.

Blanch, who also works in performance and installation, represents a growing number of contemporary artists who are exploring the speculative intersections between virtual, organic, and fabricated settings. Her work posits reality as a tangle of blurred boundaries rather than as a crisply defined set of dualistic systems—a point of view that pervades significant areas of contemporary culture, science, and technology. (Quantum physics, for example, developed to explain how what appears to be a solid form, or particle, could also be a wave.) Despite Blanch's facility with a wide number of media forms, however, her art is not about technology: ironically perhaps, her metal slabs have an archetypal, mordant, unitary feel. The suppressed energy and the metal's beaten-up charcoal, rust, and blue tinges come from the multiple hand processes packed into "The Writing of Sound."

Blanch's use of sound—with its whispered mantras and inner murmurings—does not originate in conventional music's ties to composition and the organizing principles of pitch and rhythm. Rather, Blanch seems to have inherited the fluid, open-ended aesthetic of the composer John Cage, who opened the door to all sounds in the environment, including silence, for creative work. "Unimpededness and interpenetration" of events and time—two qualities often cited by Cage as lying at the heart of the universe—characterize Blanch's art, but it is the Cagean veneration of interiority, of a meditative "inner hearing" that gathers up both random, ambient, outside noise and the faint, inner hum of bodily sound into materials for insight that best informs the genesis of "The Writing of Sound."

That insight, however, is left to the viewer to interpret: Blanch's work is never literal or didactic, but is meant to function as a trigger to the discovery of meaning. Its purpose is to awaken, rather than to teach. For this reason, "The Writing of Sound" never reveals the specific mystical or religious passages read aloud by Blanch; we simply see their wave patterns in steel. They constitute the physical yet ineffable trace of the act of praying.

Polly Ulrich is a writer living in Chicago.

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Writing of Sound, 2001. Mixed media on iron, 7 1/2" x 12".