

Divine Midsummer's Night Comedy

by Kara Q. Smith

Records and Marks

Group Exhibition

Montalvo Arts Center

15400 Montalvo Rd., Saratoga, CA 95071-0158

July 29, 2011 - October 16, 2011



Driving in our Zipcar down Montalvo Road toward our destination, we peered through the gated entrances of the houses along the way and I wondered if this set up made trick-or-treating *really* difficult in this neighborhood. Perhaps that is the point.

Hoping to be treated ourselves by the events of the evening, we arrived at the Montalvo Arts Center, a beautiful historical villa that unfolds behind its own wrought iron entrance, naturally.

The scene: pastoral attendees occupying picnic blankets and camping chairs strewn across the lawn amidst food trucks, baby strollers and dog strollers (there were several) while affectionate parties casually and haphazardly roamed the grounds cautiously interacting with sculptures.

The issue: The keg was already empty.

Even with the map provided, the grounds were a little hard to navigate when trying to track down the sculptural installations comprising the exhibition *Traces, Twigs and Time*. It's best to lose the map and make your discoveries while independently wandering. One installation I was immediately drawn to was by Bay-Area artist, Seyed Alavi. His *Signs: Text Road Poem (The Divine Comedy)*, 2011, is a series of seemingly nonsensical text formations placed on reflective yellow road signs and placed along the paved entrance and exit of the villa. Traditional municipal signage of this sort is often designed to alert viewers of something helpful, though often predictably obvious in certain conditions, such as "speed bump ahead" or "ped crossing." There was something ultimately refreshing about the non-obviousness of Alavi's placards, especially in contrast to the multitude of aforementioned "real" street signs on the property. Though I must admit I do not possess enough willpower to reconstruct the Alavi's textual interpretations back into the actual line of prose they represented from *The Divine Comedy*.

My self-determined navigation system led me quickly to the Project Space Gallery on the villa celebrating the opening night of *Records & Marks*, a group show comprising of maps created by each artist. Adriane Colburn's *Just Below (sewer to bay)*, 2005, stood out as one of the most conceptually coherent and visually arresting mapping projects, documenting the flow of sewer water through San Francisco. Alexander Chen's *MTA.ME* playfully maps New York City subway trains by tracing their movement with colorful lines in real time. When lines cross, a note from a stringed instrument is played. The piece is smart, calming and cheerful—three words few with a MetroCard would ever use to describe their daily commute.

We seemed to have missed one highlight of the evening, a performance by Nancy Popp. The remnants of her movement throughout the Montalvo property could still be seen in the form of Day-Glo orange string, diffidently suspended between trees, lampposts and building columns. Locating a starting point and tracing the orange lines through the air, I could envision her climbing trees, then moving over to scale the lamppost. Following the glowing cord I was led to a point, just past Yoko Ono's *Wishing Tree*, where it seemingly snapped and collapsed into a birds-nest-like pile several yards away. Several further yards away, Popp's string was being taken down, the traces of her recent expeditions slowly being erased from the landscape. An equivocal indication that our carbon-based sober bodies and visual memory would leave their own traces on this evening, but ultimately, it was time to drive back to the city and have a beer.

—Kara Q. Smith

This review also covers [New Sculpture on the Grounds](#) at Montalvo.

Top Image: Alexander Chen. *Conductor*, 2011. View at: <http://www.mta.me>

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