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Floating World: A Camping Ground/Tent City for Displaced Human and Bird Song

By Andy Muonio

The West San Fernando Street Bridge over the Guadalupe River and under the 87 Freeway, is a noisy place. This cacophony is heard any day or night of the year. It is a mix of urban machines – from jet engines to bicycle chains, humans sounds – voices and footsteps, as well as what is left of nature running through the center of San Jose – river sounds, with fish jumping and birds hunting. Currently thanks to ZERO1 and the City of San Jose, a site-specific artwork joins the chorus with a visually and acoustically stunning piece by Robin Lasser and Marguerite Perret, with their partners: Bruce Scherting, James Stone, Keay Edwards, Anthony Teieira and Sasha Rieker.



Floating World by Robin Lasser and Marguerite Perret Photo Credit: Andy Muonio

The sculpture titled: *Floating World: A Camping Ground/Tent City for Displaced Human and Bird Song*, consist of five miniature tent villages cantilevered off the south side of the bridge. The villages contain three to five structures modeled after FEMA disaster tents. These structures sit on chrome pipes that snake up from the cantilevered arm raising the villages above eye level giving them the impression of floating out over the river. Each village has a sound track and each tent contains a light. At night they glow with an aesthetic charm in their colors of red, white and green enhancing the floating effect. The spiked cantilevered rail is to keep humans off the work; it is bird friendly, though the doors to the tent are sealed for housing metaphor not living creatures. The work is in sharp contrast to its environment, yet it hauntingly belongs there.



Robin Lasser speaking about Floating World below the Guadalupe Bridge Photo Credit: Andy Muonio

In the daylight the first thing you notice as you approach, is the sound (listen here for [rivertentsaudio](#)). The vehicle and air traffic is loud, but the audio that emanates from the sculpture is able to rise above it and be heard. This is partially due to its own capability to monitor the ambient sound and escalate the bird song in volume and pitch, paralleling nature. (According to the artist, Marguerite Perret, recent studies have shown that birds are changing their song in urban environments so their mates can hear them). What sets the song of this sculpture apart from the ambient sound and makes it so noticeable is its artificiality to the space. It is not mistaken for the extreme white noise of the urban setting -under a freeway in the flight path of low flying jets, nor can it be mistook for the natural avian inhabitants of the river. This audio reverberates through the cathedral space of a bridge, spanning a concrete-lined river, spanned by a freeway viaduct. It fills the immense space with a new track that the spectator knows consciously does not belong there but accepts immediately. The mix of bird song, human speech and song and natural sounds such as the plopping of water highlight the

transitional space between nature and the urban setting. The spectator does not need to immediately know that one of the human voices is a Nobel prize winner, discussing climate issues, or that each village begin their own audio song after a five minute chorus with the others, or that the water sounds are based on the rise and fall of a rivers height. These are deeper layers that add profundity to the piece as the spectator explores it.



Floating World by Robin Lasser and Marguerite Perret Photo Credit: Andy Muonio

The ZERO1 theme is “build your own world,” the artists here have built a small world for light and sound. In its aesthetic beauty it houses a voice for the connection with nature in an urban environment, particularly the river, but it also goes further. It brings up gentrification issues. It highlights a truly urbanized river and the problems that arise in the attempt to tame it. This river is the heart of the “Silicon Valley” everything thing from our roads flow into it. All around this spot new stadiums, rail and housing projects and high-rises are going up and in the planning. The site itself is a testament to the modern use of concrete in its sheer height and scope. It poses the question of how can we maintain a relationship to the Guadalupe without it losing its nature and its soul. The model FEMA tents also speak to rescuing the displaced citizens that were ejected from the hundreds of houses that were leveled for the flight path of the airport and the extensive causeways carrying the ever-increasing traffic. It highlights the consequences of modernity’s desire for growth and societies addiction to speed and convenience.

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Andy Muonio holds a Masters of Fine Arts from San Jose State University, and has lived most of his life in the San Jose. He teaches Drawing and Painting courses at The Community School of Music and Arts in Mountain View, CA and is an active figure painter and printmaker at his studio in San Jose’s Japantown. Posted by Bradshaw on Sunday, September 19th, 2010 at 9:14 am.

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