

# art ltd.

## michael theodore

The various expressions in the arts are not an amorphous mass, rather, there are essentially impenetrable boundaries between different forms. That's why it is rare to describe someone, for example, as a composer and a visual artist--it's usually either/or. Yet that's exactly how Boulder-based Michael Theodore, a professor of music at the University of Colorado, needs to be described.

"I grew up in a very visual family," says Theodore, explaining how his dual interests emerged. "My mother, Marian Theodore, was an artist so I was very involved in visual practice as a youngster. It's true that I then wound up pursuing a career in music, but the interest in visual forms has been a significant thing for me." Theodore earned an undergraduate degree from Amherst College, a Master's from the Yale School of Music and a PhD from the University of California, San Diego, before joining the CU faculty in 1998. His educational experiences created a set of ideological mentors from both the East and West Coasts, including John Cage and Sol LeWitt representing the former, and Robert Irwin and James Turrell, the latter. The influences of these sources are subtle with Theodore's efforts being more critique than homage.

For Theodore, music and visual art are simply different parts of the same impulse. "All of music is based around patterns unfolding in time, and that aspect of music has always been the most interesting to me, how little ideas spool themselves out over time. My approach to all of the visual forms has been around that idea of taking some small mark or gesture and letting it unfold over space." Though visual art was a persistent interest, it took a more prominent place in his creative output only recently. "When I first started showing visual work 10 or 12 years ago," he recalls, "it was mostly around videos and it has slowly evolved from there. So it's only been in the last couple of years that I've been presenting installations and works on paper."

Theodore has a taste for new media, and his interests in art, as in music, are typically realized with the help of digital technology. He's essentially become a computer scientist who writes codes and employs robotics (often with the help of technical collaborators) that's perhaps most clearly exemplified in the works on paper. "They're mechanical drawings, done with a machine I commissioned, then I write code that the machine executes on paper with a pen on an arm. The ink markings are first, and then I come in with watercolor and paint over the top of them." These drawings obviously comment on automatism, which makes them neo-modern, but they also deconstruct patterns, which is post-minimal. "It's the generative approach in Minimalism that I respond to," says Theodore, "more than the economy of means." These sensibilities are even more clearly laid out in his installations such as *endo/exo*, which was part of "Michael Theodore: organism/mechanism," at Denver's David B. Smith Gallery this summer.



For *endo/exo*, Theodore began with the space itself, which he studied down to the pattern of its rafters and the ventilation equipment. Theodore then constructed the resulting monumental piece--28 feet long, 12 feet tall--along one wall of the gallery. The exterior has an industrial feel, made up of an architectonic grid of dark-colored metal strips, accented by mechanized rods arranged in a regular rhythm that move in response to the viewer's presence. The open grid allows viewers to clearly see the interior, which is soft and expressive, filled with draped and knotted ropes--"I wanted to do something by hand," notes Theodore. These ropes are bathed in light in different colors at different times. There is an obvious theatricality to *endo/exo*, reflecting Theodore's experiences in performing music. "It's very theatrical, with the lights coming up, and though I didn't intend it consciously, I can certainly see the prosce-nium aspects of it," Theodore says. Interestingly, in light of Theodore's music interests, *endo/exo* does not have a composed sound track, but instead its sounds are made by its moving elements which speed up or slow down depending on whether someone is in front of them or not.

Although Theodore has only been on the state's art radar for a little over a year, his work, in particular his ambitious installations, have made just about everyone sit up and listen--or, in this case, look.

"Michael Theodore: organism/mechanism" was on view at David B. Smith Gallery, Denver, CO, from May 11 to June 15, 2013.

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