

On Site

Exhibitions, installations, etc

Rie Nakajima: Cyclic

Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK

A wire extends from a flower pot filled with concrete, like a petrified vine; on one of its branches a picture of a plant, mounted on a disc, spins on a tiny motor like a mechanical parody of a plant's leaves following the sun. Three sheets of foil taped to the walls stir with any movement in the room, but make no noticeable sound. In the room's corners, invisible motors agitate small sets of plastic whistles. There are circular movements throughout Rie Nakajima's exhibition, but it's hard to tell what impulse they originate from, how they co-exist with each other, what kind of time or narrative they form in their erratic whirring.

Nakajima, whose installations and improvisations tend to blur together, uses cycles in a similar way to systems music composers of the 1970s, flattening out individual sounds within a larger rhythmic frame. David Toop, with whom

she has an ongoing live collaboration, has compared her work to the aesthetic of Japanese shojin ryori cuisine, a series of mild-flavoured courses whose "cumulative effect is to balance rather than overwhelm the others". In the sculptures and sounding devices that compose Cyclic, she explores the possibility for formal complexity and richness within and against a context of balanced neutrality. But beyond this formal level, the experience of moving through the exhibition is one of visceral confusion, veering from the pleasant to the unsettling.

The show's three rooms are strange counterpoints to one another. From the first room, the dominating sound is two rooms away: a rippling metallic clang and, behind it, a high wheeze like a wolf howl. It's hard to judge the distant position of their sources until you get close: a long copper strip hanging from the far wall agitated at moments by a motorised

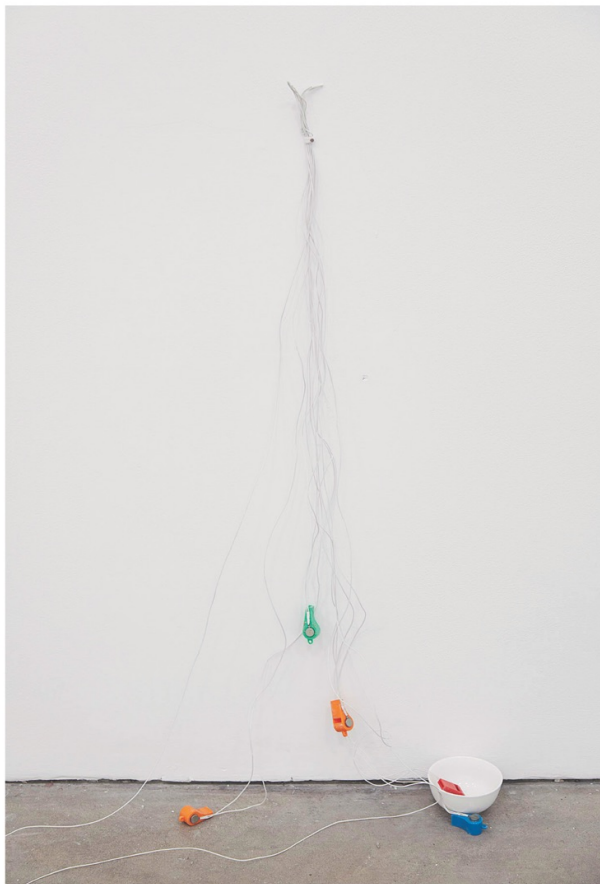
hammer; two bin bags suspended from the ceiling, plastic tubes stuck in their openings, small compressors driving air through them. Walking into the second room I hear a soft thud and turn to see a stiff-bristled brush hanging from the wall by a length of chain, propelled away from it by a motor arm and falling back. It's mirrored by a bucket in the opposite corner, bashed thrice periodically by a leather loop, on a motor arm, a hollow sound like a buoy that carries throughout the gallery. It's unclear how any of these devices are triggered, whether the rhythms stay the same, whether they're synced with devices in the same or other rooms.

The whole effect is exemplified by two mobile sculptures in the final room: concrete casts of the lower half of soda bottles, mounted on small turntables, holding up rods from which hang a water bottle and a large nail. As they rotate at different speeds, one drags on the floor, creating a dull scraping noise, the other

hits a chunk of an air duct, a deep and sound bang that you can hardly hear a short distance away.

These ambiguities points to another aspect: in Nakajima's work you find yourself constantly shifting between the microcosm of devices' often tiny, subtle motions and the macrocosm of the rooms' whole ecosystem of sounds. Some sounds jar unless heard against the wobbling patterns of other instruments, while others can only be heard on their own. In this she recalls the split in histories of free improvisation between 'small instrument' music, based on short and quick-decaying instrumental gestures, and drones: neither 'level' makes complete sense on its own, though each yields its own moments of fascination. Nakajima turns cast-offs and domestic debris, across a small space, into a rich and puzzling rearrangement of space and time.

Dan Barrow



Rie Nakajima, Cyclic installations at Ikon Gallery (2018)



Stuart Whippes