



## Chris Robinson: *Southern Lights*

Congaree River, Columbia, SC

Things have a way of coming together in Columbia, SC, where the confluence of the Saluda and Broad Rivers forms the Congaree. On Monday, August 21, 2017, when the trajectories of the earth and the moon as related to the sun came together to create a total solar eclipse over much of the continental United States, Columbia was squarely in the “path of totality” of this rare occurrence.

More than 120 special eclipse-themed events took place over the weekend preceding the eclipse, as tens of thousands of visitors flocked to the South Carolina capital. Among them was the launch of *Southern Lights*, which had its debut on August 19 as the latest in a series of public artworks commissioned in a collaboration between multiple local entities—this time involving museums, business guilds, corporate sponsor BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina, the city’s cultural affairs outfit One Columbia for Arts and History, and What’s Next Midlands, an “idea hub that inspires community action.” Designed by Chris Robinson, currently chair of the art department at University of South Carolina Beaufort, the high-tech *Southern Lights* is one of only two permanent laser installations of its type in the world, and the only one in the United States. Developed over 14 months preceding the eclipse, Robinson’s vision involved placement of argon ion lasers on both sides of the Congaree River near the scenic Gervais and Blossom Street bridges. His design incorporates mirrors that reflect green and blue beams of focused light across the water. The result is a spectacular light sculpture spanning some two kilometers of river and illuminating the surrounding natural environment for about three hours each evening, depending upon when the sun sets. The installation is planned to last at least eight to 10 years, and it will offer different impressions for viewers at different observation points.

Robinson holds an MFA from the University of Massachusetts and is known to work at the intersection of art, science, digital imaging, and nanotechnology. This particular work, unusually, used such technologies to present viewers with engineered light during an analogous absence of natural light in the daytime sky. “The blue and green colors are inherent in the argon ion laser, and the eye is most receptive to green,” Robinson explained, noting the “unusual nature of the light” produced, and its ability to reveal often unnoticed aspects of the surrounding environment. “Light is ubiquitous, all around us every day; it’s physical, but very hard to quantify. The laser allows me to build a structure in the night sky that quantifies and illuminates light.”

The installation officially debuted on the river by EdVenture Children’s Museum; Italian ices and an “Eclipse Pale Ale” created for the occasion were consumed by its first viewers. One Columbia director Lee Snelgrove described *Southern Lights* as “a unique opportunity that brought together ... the Total Eclipse Weekend campaign as well as nine other partners.” The work is, as such, an instance of public art used in part to symbolize and stimulate economic prosperity in a city in the process of growing and branding itself; *Southern Lights* is, then, a work about quantification in more ways than one.

The artist stresses that the piece is environmentally friendly and poses no risk to viewers, traffic, wildlife, or the river itself. The beams are installed far above human reach; birds, apparently, will instinctively avoid them.

—August Krickel

## Marching to the Beat

Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

It’s difficult to see where you’re going while in the midst of a moving mass. That idea is incredibly apparent in our volatile political climate, where frightening shifts in policy ignite passionate support and resistance, hopes and fears. We can look back to the empowered mass of the Women’s March at the start of 2017—estimated to attract half a million participants in Washington, DC, alone—as a salient example. This huge procession’s undeniable energy promised to ignite a movement, but months later, it’s been more difficult to gauge where it led.

Through its title, *Marching to the Beat* [July 14–August 26, 2017] suggests a sense of group action and alludes to some inherent linguistic ambiguities: the phrase could refer to a marching band playing in unison, a protest march, or a parade of zombies, and the audible rhythms that serve as the source and score of their literal movement. These themes manifest in works that are generally focused on gatherings of figures who may engage in impending forms of dance—that is, the show is suggestive, rather than full of, movement. The gallery experience is fairly quiet—just the muffled audio of the videos playing in a screening room—but sound is also implied throughout. The show even comes with downloadable mixtapes by Kutlug Ataman, Tammy Rae Carland, and Juliana Huxtable: it’s possible to make this party your own—a virtual gathering, silent disco style.

*Marching to the Beat* is a gracious summer group show featuring works by more than 25 artists who recognize the joyousness of the march, as well as the sense of dangerous distraction it might engender. Near the entrance to the gallery are two suspended sculptures by Chelsea Culprit, who depicts exotic dancers in shiny, colorful transparent acrylic. Their body parts (and their Frederick’s of Hollywood platform shoes) are affixed with moveable joints, giving the pieces a fluidity of movement; the lines of the plastic articulate a wonderful sense of sexiness in these commanding post-feminist icons, which seem able to contort ambidextrously, playfully, and politically.

Culprit’s dancers are the kind of workers you’ll find in an adult theater not far from the gallery, which is in the midst of San Francisco’s Tenderloin neighborhood. The location and the inherent vibe of the street are also echoed in the *Liquor Store Theatre* (2015) videos by Maya Stovall, a Detroit-based artist who choreographs movement in unglamorous urban locations, an interruption in public space that contains the joy of physicality and the rigors of contemporary dance practice—along with social critique. In addition to her video, Stovall did one live per-

above: Chris Robinson, *Southern Lights*, 2017, installation view [courtesy of the artist]



Maya Stovall, *Liquor Store Theatre*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2017, HD videostill [courtesy of the artist]

formance, leading a gallery audience along the neighborhood sidewalk, past people who were asleep outdoors, to first stop and engage in a series of sinewy, contorted movements, and then visit a liquor store, where she purchased libations for a street party/gallery reception—cheap wine, vodka, cigarettes. The range of offerings gave a pointed meaning to shopping local, and it created an uncommon interaction between people who live in the neighborhood and art viewers who generally don't linger there after an opening.

Allusions to classical dance are visible in ballet paintings and collages by Karen Kilimnik, as well as Carrie Mae Weems' self-portrait triptych in which she is seen dancing in an ornate room, and a photograph of dance legend Anna Halprin in action, circa 1940–1950. The latter two artists are pictured solo in each work, the choreographer seen as a leader who enforces some discipline on performers, perhaps; these works are literal in their address of dance, perhaps skewing it away from the more sociopolitical implications of other pieces.

More interesting in this vein is Yinka Shonibare's 2004 *Un Ballo in Maschera* (*A Masked Ball*), a video that stages a climactic scene from a Verdi opera of the same name and inspired by the late-18th-century assassination of Swedish King Gustav III. The dancers are clothed in Venetian-style garb made with Shonibare's signature African fabrics; the performers' gender roles are made fluid (the king is played by a woman), and they dance without musical accompaniment. Instead, the main soundtrack is provided by the dancers' gasps, and the refrain of the booming gunshots as the scene repeats. It's a colorful spectacle of controlled violence set to a drumbeat of political payback that certainly resonates today.

A subtext of impending action is one of the show's strengths. Two works by Puppies Puppies involve expectation of dance: in one, through an appropriation of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Go-Go* platform, itself previously appropriated by Sturtevant; and in another, as a primitive bamboo drum, in form like ones utilized by various ancient tribes—both objects being places that could easily be activated at any time. Their possibility as tools emanates from both. But they mostly remain silent.

Andrea Bowers' towering drawing *The Woman Soldier, Mexican Revolution* (*Illustration by Jose Guadalupe Posada, 1910–1912*) (2017) is an appropriation of another sort. It's an enlarged version of a historical figure, a woman wearing a wide sombrero and holding a rifle vertically—one person at the ready to join others in a fight for powerful social change. The image gains added urgency through being rendered in acrylic marker on a patchwork of corrugated cardboard.

Bowers' drawing does much to add some gravity to the proceedings, but at the same time the general tone of the exhibition is, wisely, more about finding levity and the conviviality of community. This spirit shows in a few photographs on view, such as Malick Sidibé's *Baila Club Darsalame 1962* (1962/2001), which shows an African couple semiformally posed in a dancehall, with a portrait of Mali's first president peering down from the wall behind them. The same effect appears in Wolfgang Tillmans' amber-hued photograph *The Spectrum / Dagger* (2014), a shot of a group of friends in a nightclub advertised as a haven for the "the deep lez world of the NY underground"—a site where dance informs identity; and in two portraits from Rineke Dijkstra's *Krazyhouse* series, which shows individuals who have been recruited from the low-lit dance floor throngs to have a formal

portrait shot against a light, neutral background. The resulting images reveal the subjects' individuality, their studied fashion sense as they have individually attired themselves for a nightclub battle.

The pop vernacular of those works is formalized in Tammy Rae Carland's 2017 sculpture *How Soon Is Now*, a title borrowed from The Smiths—a band whose music provided a soundtrack for leagues of misfits, from the 1980s to the present. On a large transparent Plexiglas cube, Carland has arranged twelve cast porcelain microphones into a starburst shape. The composition silently suggests the powerful feedback shriek that might result from such a gathering, an idea that is echoed in the mirror at the base of the piece, reflecting these objects and their potential power. Thinking about harnessing this kind of potent energy, for positive change, is exactly what we needed this politically fraught summer.

—Glen Helfand