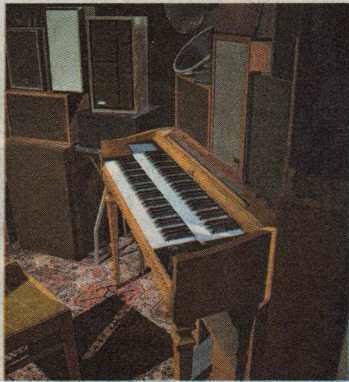


CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*



© Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller /
Fraenkel Gallery

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's "The Poetry Machine" (2017).

Leonard Cohen's words add vivid glow

By Charles Desmarais

Critics rarely confess that their good and bad days, their shifting moods and personal challenges, necessarily affect their responses to art. But, of course, what any of us brings to a work is at least half our experience of it.

I visited Fraenkel Gallery this week to preview an exhibition of works by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, artists known for intensely romantic applications of cold technology. I should have been better prepared.

Not 90 minutes had passed

Short recordings of Leonard Cohen reading poetry have been electronically mapped to the organ keys.

since I had learned of the sudden death of David Wiegand, my editor at The Chronicle. The one who hired me on faith and gradually became a trusted writing coach. The one barely a year older than I.

At the gallery, I was seated in a darkened room at a small organ and encouraged to press a key. The doleful voice of the late singer and poet Leonard Cohen issued from one of maybe 30 speakers piled on the instrument and arrayed about the room. Nothing could have better suited my mood.

Replacing musical notes, short recordings of Cohen reading poetry have been

Desmarais continues on E3

Vivid new dimension for Cohen's work

Desmarais from page E1

electronically mapped to the organ keys. As with any organ, the longer a key is depressed, the longer the passage plays. Multiple keys played all at once create overlapping sounds — chords of text, as read by the author, from his 2006 collection, "Book of Longing."

"You go your way..." "First of all nothing will happen/ and a little later/ nothing will happen again..." "I'll go your way too..."

"The Poetry Machine," as the work is called, was completed last year. The artists were in the gallery when I visited, and they told me that they had been discussing a collaboration with Cohen, hoping against hope they might persuade him to record something tailored to the project, before he died in 2016.

A tape of him reading, previously unknown to them, turned up sometime later. The "Machine" became, only posthumously, a joint work.

"And death is old/ But it's always new/ I freeze with fear/ And I'm there for you."

Two other works, each in their own room, complete the Fraenkel exhibition, which is on view through July 5. "Road Trip," a deceptively simple piece from 2004 marked by precision timing of image and sound, is a slideshow accompanied by an uncharacteristically rough recording of the artists' running commentary. It, too, deals with separation and loss, but with a chilly dispassion that only heightens its pathos.

"Sad Waltz and the Dancer Who Couldn't Dance" (2015) has all the hallmarks of a Cardiff/Bures Miller piece: complex mechanics, rich sound and an abundance of sentiment. A pair of marionettes, one a pianist, the other a dancer, perform at the touch of a button.

The puppet has long served as a vehicle to carry emotions too universal to claim as special, too personal to slough off as common. The cliché of the brokenhearted entertainer trying, and failing, to put on a good face is awfully threadbare.

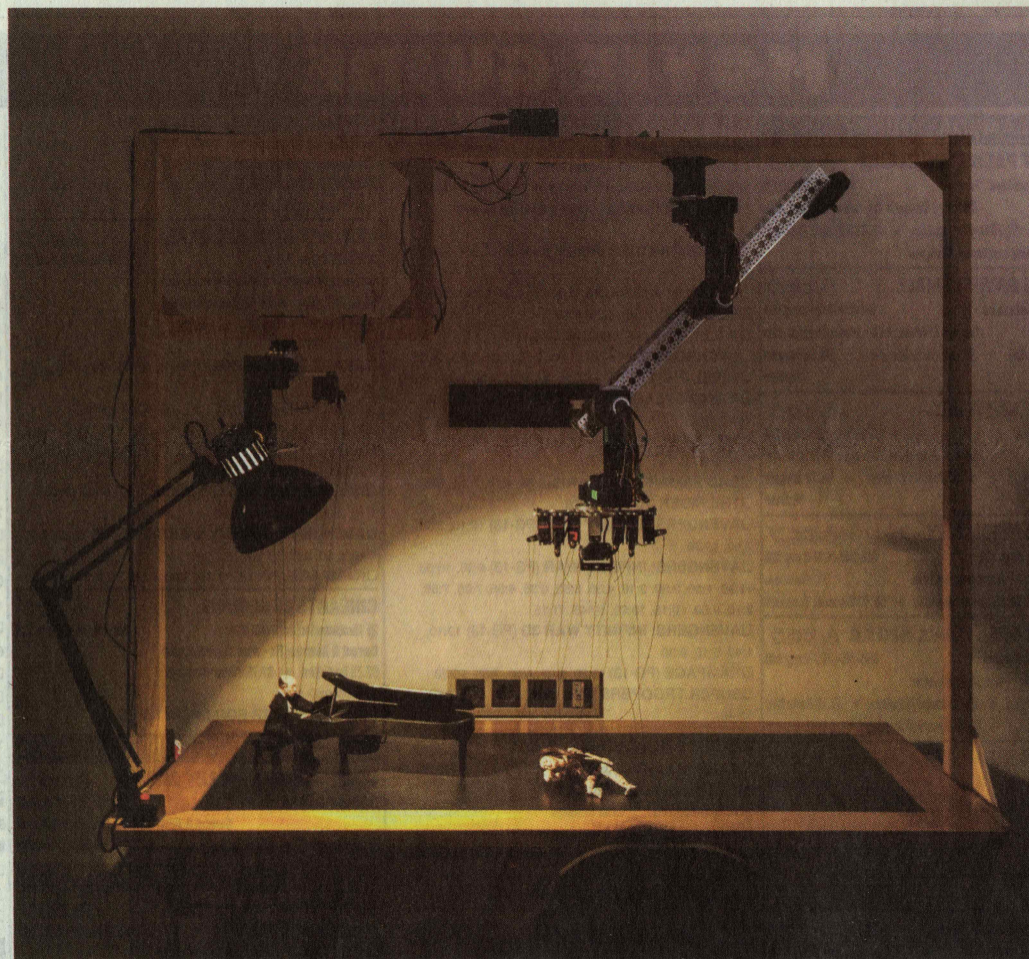
Even so, we might weep at the thought of robotic digits controlling surrogate humans in an infinite duet of disappointment.

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Photos © Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller / Fraenkel Gallery

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's "The Poetry Machine" (2017) incorporates singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen's words.



Cardiff and Bures Miller's "Sad Waltz and the Dancer Who Couldn't Dance" (2015), which employ a pair of marionettes, incorporates complex mechanics and rich sound.



A marionette pianist conveys emotion in "Sad Waltz and the Dancer Who Couldn't Dance."

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller: The Poetry Machine and Other Works: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays. Through July 5. Free. Fraenkel Gallery, 49 Geary St., S.F. (415) 981-2661. <https://fraenkelgallery.com>
Also, check out this related exhibition: <http://bit.ly/ArtguyCardiff>

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller: "Forest (for a thousand years...)": Noon-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Through June 30. \$2-\$5. UC Santa Cruz Arboretum and Botanic Garden, 1156 High St., Santa Cruz. (831) 502-2998. <http://ias.ucsc.edu>