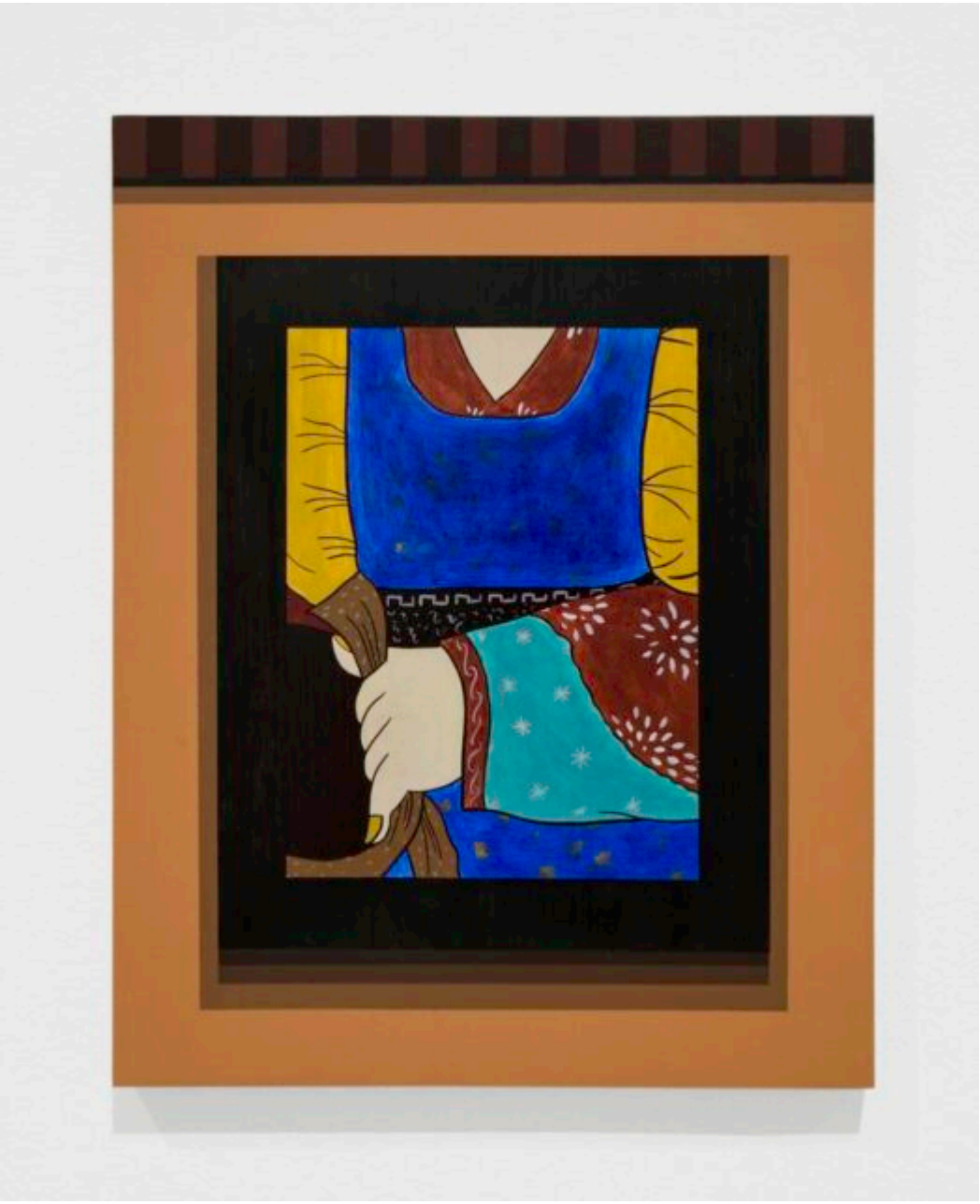
Ears Embigger: Day 2

Beginning Friday I abandoned the idea of posting every day. It was all too much. So here we go on catch up.

We took time to visit the Tennessee Triennial at the Knoxville Museum of Art. While we were there we heard Kali Malone sound checking her *Living Torch* presentation. The atrium at the museum is a fantastic place for immersive listening; the acoustics are lively and deliver dramatically different frequency responses depending on where you are in the room. It sounded fantastic but sadly it was my only trek out to the museum. It's not really that far from the main venue cluster but somehow feels daunting when dashing from one show to the next.

Of note among the art on exhibit were five paintings by painter Mary Laube. Born in South Korea and adopted to the United States, Laube visited her native country as an adult and began to explore her heritage. The results are gorgeous, deep images that bridge her Korean and American backgrounds and draw the viewer into the frame. An Assistant Professor at University of Tennessee Knoxville, Laube also co-founded the Warp Whistle Project with composer Paul Schuette. Their work is a blend of music/sound and Laube's visual art. Here's a photo from her website of one of the Triennial pieces. It makes me want to see more of her work.



Heartache at Dusk, acrylic and oil on panel, 2023

Back to the music, I began my Friday the same way I did Thursday, settling in at St. John's Cathedral for another dose of Yarn/Wire. This program was dedicated to the work of composer Annea Lockwood, who was in attendance for the show. It was also a big draw for several of the musicians in the festival, always a sign you're in the right place for something special. And it was.

Yarn/Wire pianist Laura Barger opened with "Ear Walking Woman," a ten-movement piece for solo prepared piano. The mix of standard and graphic notation gives the performer plenty of room for interpretation, and Barger was well up to the moment,

delivering a wide range of strange and beautiful sounds/noises. The full Yarn/Wire quartet ended the set with a piece Lockwood developed with them called “Into the Vanishing Point.” Inspired by reports of the world’s collapsing insect population, the piece evokes the sounds of natures without resort to explicit mimicry. As with all the Yarn/Wire performances I heard, the opportunity for deep listening is the point, and it is an invitation to be cherished.

In between those two pieces, Nate Wooley delivered what was perhaps the most transcendently sublime moment of the festival: “Becoming Air,” a solo trumpet piece he commissioned from Lockwood. I doubt there are any sounds left unturned in trumpet vocabulary after this. Standard tones; odd chirps and bleats; tones produced on the trumpet without a mouthpiece; tones produced on the mouthpiece alone, from either end; circular breathing segments; a segment with a microphone shoved deep into the instrument, run through a Fender guitar amp (Deluxe perhaps?) for clean amplification, distortion, and feedback. Between each segment, Wooley sat quietly in meditation, as if to “become air” himself. (This is someone who clearly maintains a personal meditation practice.) The piece ended with circular breathing that lasted for-ev-er while Wooley slowly rose to standing until the trumpet was pointed skyward, volume peaking, and then just as slowly returned to seated as the volume decreased into a whisper.

Nate Wooley, “Becoming Air” (back of composer’s head in the center)

I had to take a break, letting go my clever plans to catch two or three acts before the next essential. I opted for a cup of coffee and a sit on a bench in the sunshine to recapitulate and absorb Lockwood’s stunning musical universe. (Check out the album *Becoming Air/Into the Vanishing Point* here.)

Next up, a Mary Halvorson extravaganza, with performance of her *Amaryllis* and *Belladonna* albums by her sextet and the Mivos Quartet respectively. I ~~wrote~~ raved about these albums last year and the performances lived up to expectation. Halvorson’s playing has always been a delight; these albums

show her remarkable growth as a composer.

I had to duck out of *Belladonna* a tad early to be sure I got a seat for the highly-anticipated Aftab/Iyer/Ismaily trio at the Tennessee Theater. This is a group to be reckoned with, and Aftab continues to establish herself as one of the most gifted singers on the scene. The sound mix did them no favors – Aftab was giving the sound engineer explicit directions regarding EQ and reverb between songs to alleviate the muddiness – but nobody walked away disappointed. Vijay Iyer is setting standards these days, and it is easy to hear why Shahzad Ismaily is regarded so highly by his varied collaborators; his contributions are subtle and beautiful, always on point. And I'd love to get a translation of Aftab's Urdu lyrics.

As soon as the trio took a bow I dashed to the Bijou to catch the Tyshawn Sorey Trio with Bill Frisell and Joe Lovano. Music simply cannot be better than this. Though I often found myself confused about where they were within the form of any given piece, the trio had no such trouble; their ability to hold the form intact as they venture farther and farther from recognizable formal landmarks is staggering. And as with the Vijay Iyer Trio the evening previous, Sorey delivered another clinic in what jazz drumming is all about.

I gobbled an energy bar and took a few dip-in moments at Gyan Riley (St. John's) and Marc Ribot (The Standard). Both were terrific, but I had a destination in mind: Jackson Terminal for Irreversible Entanglements. When I heard their first album, I declared "This is the best Art Ensemble of Chicago album I've heard since 1985!" Live it gets even better. This is pure energy jazz, but it is by no means a random squawking fest. The sax, trumpet, bass, and drums are playing with clearly recognizable structures that morph one into the next. Anchored by drummer Tcheser Holmes and Luke Stewart (delivering the most Malachi-like bass since, well, Malachi himself), the group began and after about 55 minutes of non-stop intensity, completed their set to ecstatic applause.

The focal point of Irreversible Entanglements is poet/artist/activist Camae Ayewa, known more widely as Moor Mother. I'd been trying to catch her again ever since she appeared with the Art Ensemble at Big Ears 2019. It was worth the wait, but I'm damned if I'm waiting that long again. Moor Mother is one of the most electrifying and committed performers I've seen in any context; her energy and vigor makes Iggy look like a playful puppy. We picked up a book of her poetry because, well, because she is fkng awesome, that's why. Moor Mother appeared at least three other times at Big Ears, including a set with Lonnie Holley that everyone was raving about. I'll be making room in my schedule for more Moor Mother next time.

That was it for us – even though Makaya McCraven was down the street and the legend David Murray around the corner – but as a wise sage once said: A man has got to know his limitations.