

Echoes of the Staghorn Fern: Sound and Sculpture in Mark Booth's Installation at the Lincoln Park Conservatory

By Christian Sheppard

Enter the Fern room at the Lincoln Park Conservatory, where a metallic sign tells you that here “a small dinosaur would feel at home”: *“long before Illinois was covered by prairie, it was a wet, tropical forest. Seed plants had not evolved, and many of the early plants reproduced with dust-like airborne spores. This room brings together the living relics of those ancient plants to recreate a scene from long ago.”*

With no place to sit, you must stand or wander. You hear water falling both to the left and right. Then clicking, a droning, a ring, and continuous ringing. An underlying low-toned throb of life emerges, and over it a sharp punctuating buzz. Then only falling water, until the clicking begins again...

This is the sound installation by Mark Booth, entitled “In the event that the staghorn fern becomes metallic and that each of its bifurcating leaves rings like a tuning fork, please turn off this recording.” It's a title as evocative and intricate as the flora that surrounds it, and the installation is foremost a call to attend to the staghorn fern itself. In the center of the room, slightly larger than an adult human head, the magnificent staghorn is sculptural, as if posing to be photographed by Blossfeldt. Another sign directs our attention to the plant's most remarkable features: its two different types of leaves – antlers and shields – and that it grows upon rocky cliffs, suspended between earth and air. The metal of the sign is what the title of Booth's piece tells you the fern might transform into. Who knows what this outlandish plant is capable of? Could it suddenly change from vegetable to mineral? And if such a plant could communicate in sound, what would it sound like if not a cicada – which it's said inspired Mark Booth with his guitar and uvular trills.

Soon you begin to notice other things: further sounds at first, the voices of others in the space, particularly children. And a large delicate web suspended over the pool before the central staghorn, its filaments like so many guitar strings, with a silvery grey spider in the center. There are other staghorns on the wall, and still others hanging from the ceiling; and a larger one – a “Triangle Staghorn” – behind our central plant. This piece invites an awareness of our connection to those alien living realms of the insect and the non-flowering plant. (How different this piece would seem, how much more erotic and less playfully ironic, if installed in the orchid room!)

Goethe professed that art is not so much about what it shows you but about how, after viewing it, you see the entire world differently. Mark Booth has made such a work of art, offering a synesthetic experience, senses folding into other senses. From the sound of the music mimicking the cicada, it recalls the idiosyncratic life-cycle of that insect – which recently appeared but won't emerge for another 17 years – evoking different time periods, periodicities, and durations. We recall the era of the dinosaurs that would be “at home” in the now increasingly uncanny fern room.

Here you are invited to entertain new notions of change, fantastical evolutions. Mark Booth's piece itself was only of a time, through this past September, and thus it brings back the preciousness of the present moment where you stand in the fern room and contemplate metamorphoses. You suddenly catch yourself smiling at the thought of this strange plant's even stranger transformation.

The transience of the installation plays against the faith in high culture and neo-classical values embodied in Lincoln Park's lovely gilded-age conservatory. The once tranquil fern room is transformed: human culture is no longer the master of nature, but now actually akin to horticulture. In this way, it is a work of art worthy of John Cage, evoking changes in the whimsical tradition of the Taoist master Chuang Tze.

Beautiful, strange, and provocative, Mark Booth's graceful installation has made the transient transcendent.

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