

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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ART REVIEW

Intersection of minimalism, politics

By Alan G. Artner
Tribune art critic

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Twenty years after the rise of the temporary environment known as installation art, Chicagoans still will not have encountered anything quite like Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's "Wake Up," the brilliant sight-and-sound installation created by the Puerto Rico-based collaborative for the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.

The high, white intersecting walls of "Wake Up," which entirely fill the space and present views of unadorned L-shaped structures to each cardinal point on the compass, may well resemble some of the most minimal sculptural works from the 1970s. But the piece's strong formal purity exists side-by-side with equally strong political content, and where most contemporary artists choose one or the other, the aim here is to raise consciousness and offer a work for aesthetic delectation.

Both are achieved in the coming together of visual simplicity, aural complexity and powerful suggestiveness.

The walls are high enough so viewers can barely look over them to the other side. Sections of beams and the vaulted ceiling of the gallery are visible above the walls. The structures conceal more than they reveal from every viewing angle. Played in the space are recordings by many trumpeters, in many musical styles. All interpret reveille, the signal sounded in early morning to call together military personnel. No one interpretation sounds all the notes of reveille. In fact, most of them show little obvious kinship to the tune, and they have been altered further to sound like other instruments, the hum of traffic or roar of trains, and various kinds of drones.

More than 95 minutes elapse before the recorded cycle repeats. There are no dramatic peaks or valleys, just variations in density and volume. These variations trigger lights that are concealed in the walls and trained upward. The color of the lights -- a warm peach, presumably from incandescent bulbs -- intensifies according to the music, with more or fewer lights coming on in various locations on a left-right axis of the longest wall.

To some, the light and its reflections may suggest dawn. But because the light flashes at different intensities, it suggests more strongly the explosions of armed conflict, now near, now far. Long passages of sound have no light whatsoever, and such lulls also underline the association with warfare, its apparently random assaults separated by periods of eerie calm.

The structural leanness of the piece additionally allows it to be seen as pure abstraction, though if it is, there's some diminishment, for the words of the title form a command as well

as a description of being roused. Viewers are urged, in effect, to "wake up" to conditions that are unseen and from which they are sheltered. But peril is just on the other side of the wall. So how long can anyone afford to be merely a spectator?

This week's fourth anniversary of a war that was supposed to be swiftly conducted and easily won gives the unsentimental "Wake Up" more than a little poignancy.