

ALYSON SHOTZ

FORCE OF NATURE

October 11, 2014–April 5, 2015



Joe Nanashe's Minimalist Altar at "Leaps Into the Void"

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | JUNE 18, 2014

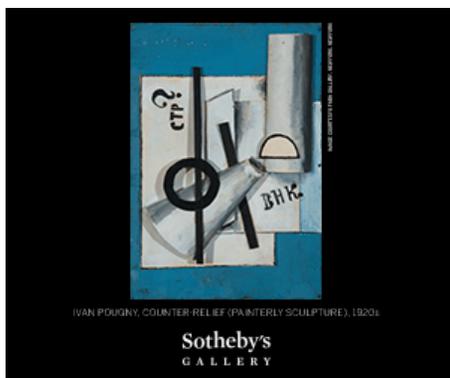


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A view of Joe Nanashe's installation at Garis & Hahn.
(Photo by Scott Indrisek)

Seven ladders, eight Casio keyboards, and a dozen or so blaring lights: not exactly consecrated materials for a quasi-religious experience. Yet it's with these humble materials that [Joe Nanashe](#) has created an "agnostic allusion to spirituality," a series of interrelated sculptures filling the downstairs space of Garis & Hahn in New York as part of the exhibition "[Leaps Into the Void: Shamanism, Meditation, Transcendence, Oblivion](#)," on view through August 16. (The references at the fore are more art-historical than religious: the show borrows part of its name from [Yves Klein's iconic 1960 photomontage](#) of a seemingly tragic fall.)

While the works on paper and canvas in the upstairs gallery conjure surrealistic scenes — animal-man hybrids in the work of Gwyn Joy, or psychedelic vision-quests in the mixed-media paintings of Michael Maxwell — Nanashe's installation creates a barebones sculptural context that the artist says was inspired by everything from Mannerist paintings of the Crucifixion to the infinitely-looping drawings of M.C. Escher. On slightly raised platforms, two sets of four Casios form an interlocking square shape, the keyboards propped up on each other and sounding a single, droning note. One set handles the lower register, while the second pulses with a higher octave; the programmed sound Nanashe has chosen is "#218: Heaven," a variety of celestial-choir effect. Next to the keyboards are two structures composed of simple stacked ladders, forming a sort of broken rainbow shape; behind them, there's an aluminum ladder festooned with bright lighting. (The industrial-looking illuminated pillar is dubbed "Prometheus.")

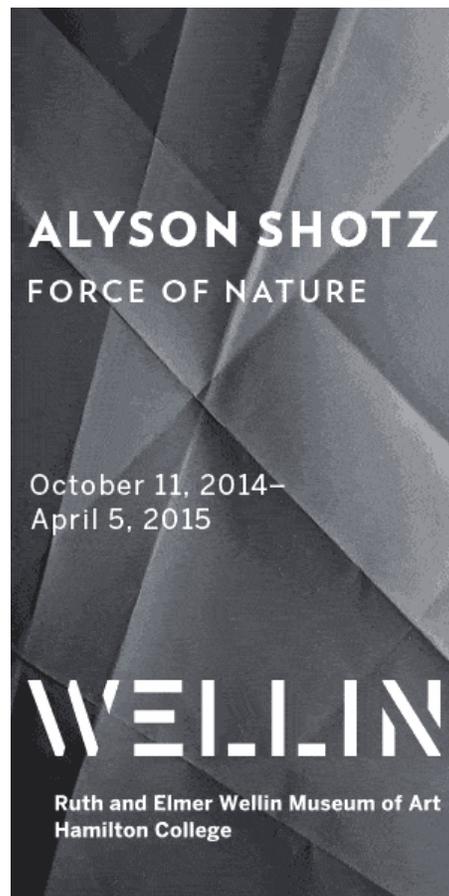


Standing in the center of the room the viewer is accosted by both the light — which plays staggered shadows on the walls and leaves a persistent afterimage if one stares too long — and the competing tonal throbbing of the dual Casio clusters. It's not exactly a Catholic church, but there is a sense of quiet, monastic contemplation — deliberate symmetries and an inexplicable logic. "Installation art uses the same devices and interaction as religious ceremony," Nanashe said. "There is a way you move through the space, a beginning, middle, and end. They both use symbols that are understood by insiders: obtuse imagery and knowledge. This installation is like a minimalist altar. It's ritual stripped of religion."

Despite its basic composition and readymade materials, the piece is embedded within an entire web of resonances for the artist. There are the ladders that appear in paintings like Rosso Fiorentino's 1521 "[Deposition](#)," in which a group of men ascend to retrieve Jesus's body from the cross. The positioning of the ladders in Nanashe's installation also bring to mind Duchamp — akin to a sculpture that might be titled "Ladder Descending a Staircase," he said. "I like how the ladder is such a utilitarian object, that we understand completely our interaction with it and how we navigate it in the real world," he continued. "Then, with its utility removed, it becomes something else: a metaphor for knowledge, a religious totem."

Wandering through the piece while Nanashe made some final adjustments, I noted that it collectively looked a bit like a platform for some impending appearance, a stage set for a loaded absence. "A considerable amount of Western culture has been built around, essentially, a body that wasn't there: *They went to the tomb, and it was gone*," Nanashe said. "I'm fascinated by magicians, the disappearing act. I think there is a connection there. What, I don't know. Maybe that's why I make the work I make."

Spend enough time in the downstairs space at Garis & Hahn, and Nanashe's "minimalist altar" starts to seep into your ears and eyes. The hum of the Casios alternates between a hypnotic wash, like binaural beats, and an intimation of anxiety. "I love that moment when things flip, when the innocent quickly turns sinister, or something soothing becomes painful," Nanashe said. "The lights, the keyboards, and the ladders become blinding, deafening, and overwhelming. I'm fascinated by that instant of recognition that something is very wrong."



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