

GALLERIES

Composing a Symphony of War with Instruments and Everyday Objects

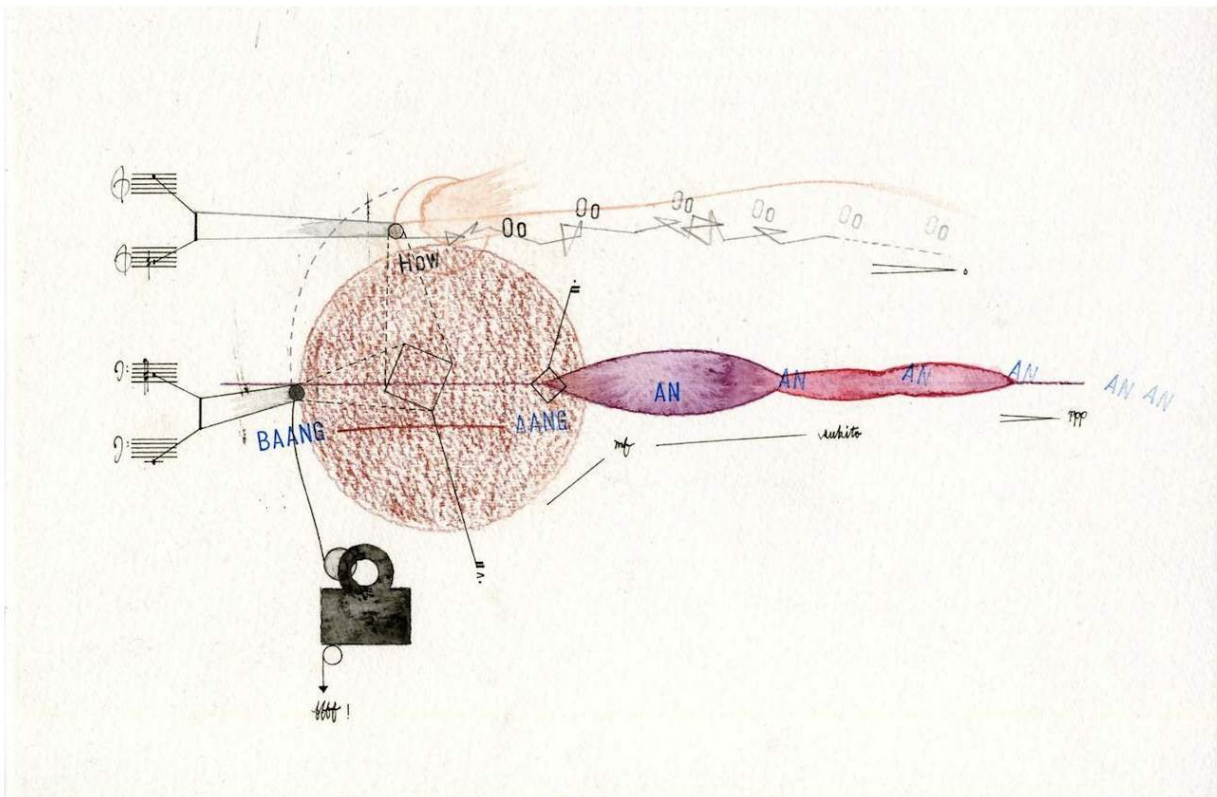
by **Joe Bucciero** on December 9, 2015



Samson Young, 'Pastoral Music' (2015), installation view (all images courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery)

What does war sound like? The crescendoing rat-tat-tat of a pre-revolutionary drumline creeping closer and closer, punctuated by the occasional pop of a single-shot rifle, like we hear in *The Patriot*? Or the amplified bombast of Wagner booming from a helicopter, underlaid by a percussive assault of AK-47 fire, per *Apocalypse Now*? Perhaps the abyssal silence of an individual psyche, upset by the nervous breathing of soldiers and civilians, à la *The Hurt Locker*? Or maybe it's not so cinematic; maybe it's just functional, machinic, full of non-musical gunfire, chopper blades, tires on dirt, and walkie-talkie banter, as heard in the hour-long YouTube video, "War Sounds – 1 Hour! Urban Warfare Ambience! As real as it gets!" Each of these distinct examples evinces a sound marked by regimentation — ordered, repeated elements, whether a theme from *Die Walküre* over Vietnam or the tense, beating nothingness of Hollywood-ized Iraq.

For Hong Kong artist Samson Young, however, war sounds less obviously martial; indeed, it's pretty random. It's calm, somewhat foreboding — human, organic, often silent but with bursts of technological noise. And most importantly for Young, war sounds musical. Visitors to the artist's current exhibition at Team Gallery, Pastoral Music, see him sitting in the center of the room wearing fatigues, staring into an obsolete television monitor, surrounded by a surfeit of sound-making devices, some traditionally musical, like a contact mic hooked to a bass drum, and some definitely not, like soil, a room fan, Corn Flakes. What's going on exactly? The unconventional musical scores hanging — or, in some cases, drawn directly — on the walls suggest that Young's restrained movement amid the mess of sound-producing gadgets must constitute a musical performance.

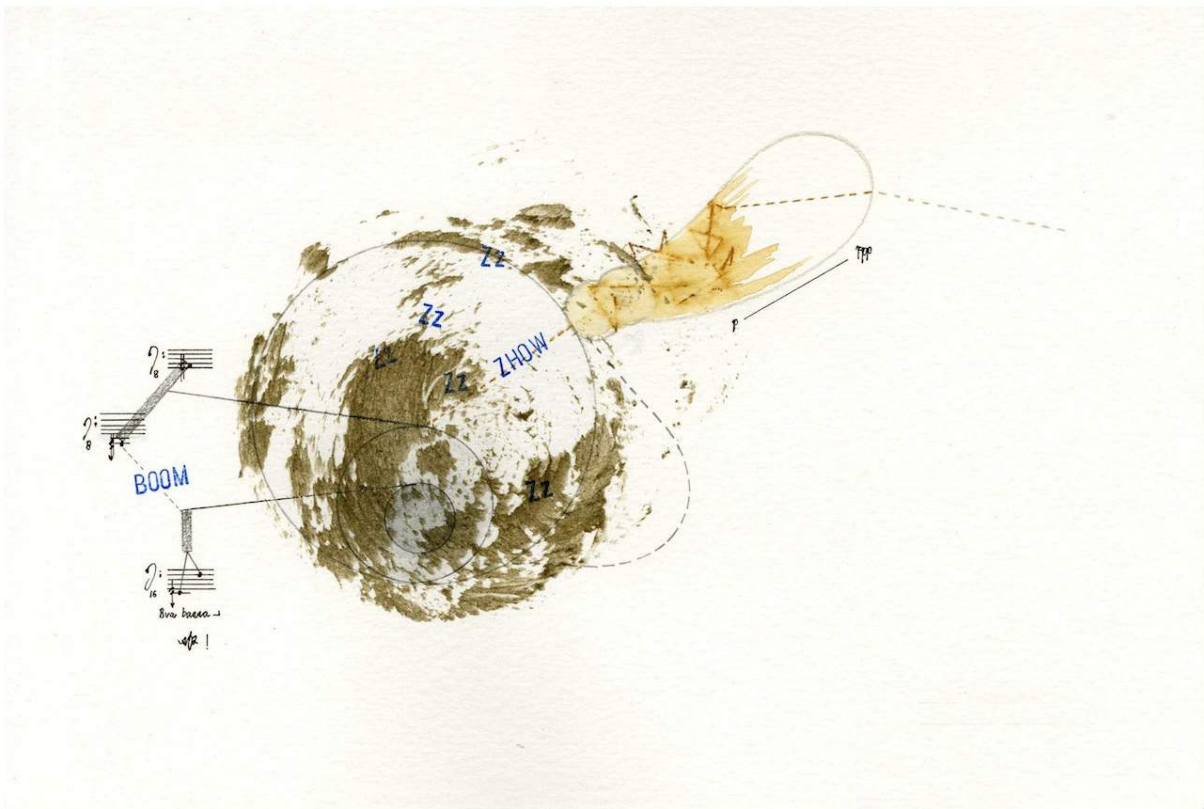


Samson Young, "Studies for Pastoral Music (4 Gauge Elephant Gun)" (2015), pencil, ink, watercolor, and modeling paste on paper, 8 x 11.5 inches

Watching the performance, "Nocturne," from the initial frontal view, it soon becomes clear that his actions — scraping the skin of the bass drum, sprinkling the dirt in front of a microphone — also have something to do with what's happening on the television screen. A walk around Young's setup unveils the relationship: the screen shows black-and-white CNN war footage (stark moving images of a Middle Eastern desert), and the sounds Young is making provide a live soundtrack. His artist's statement clarifies that this is a "Sonic Warfare Training Program." Young takes on the role of military personnel, then, fabricating the sounds of war for use in combat. Function aside, the effect for the audience is nonetheless, again, musical and performative, forcing us to listen deeply, imagining the real-world sites and causes of such tones, however manufactured.



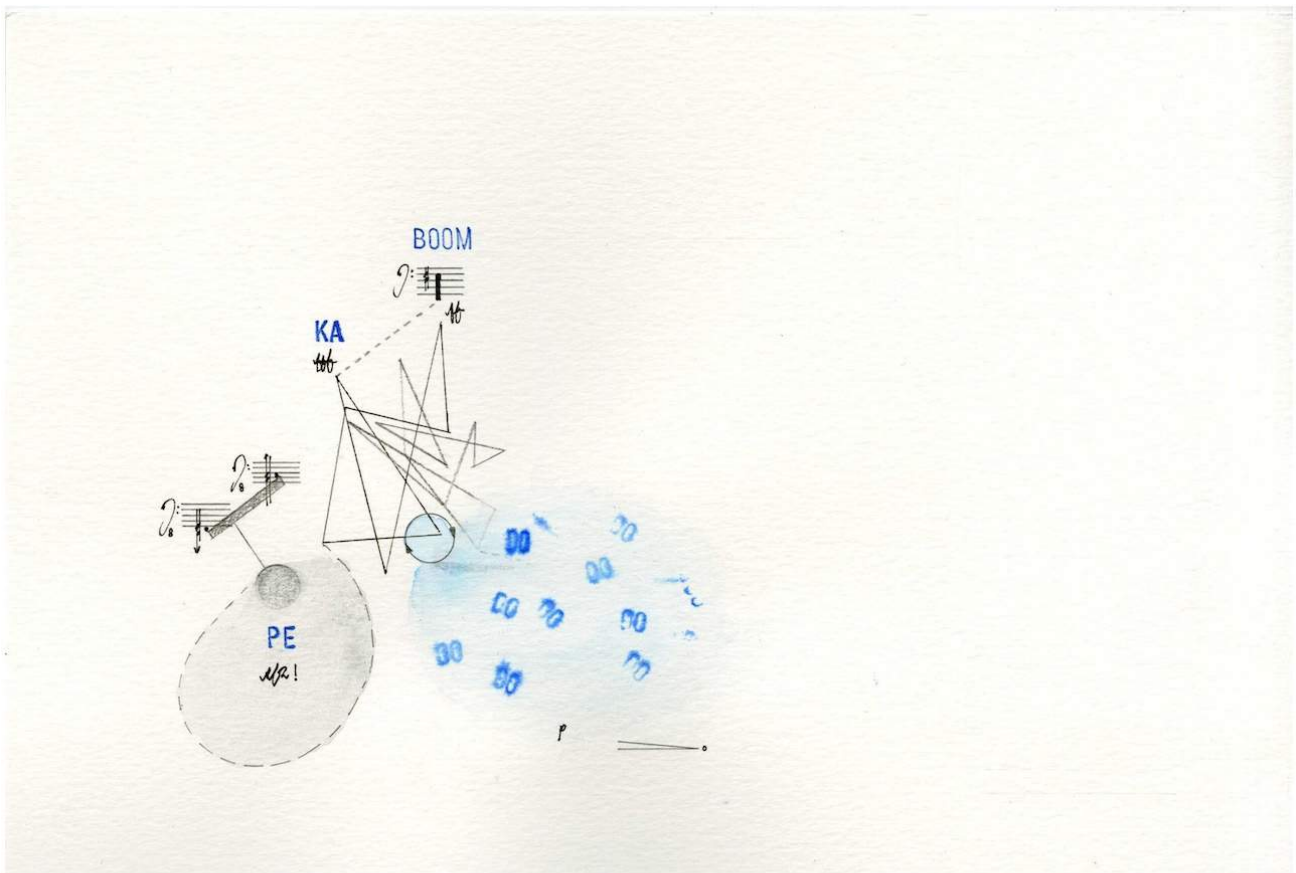
The sparse mix of drum thuds, fan-made white noise, and other foley-style sounds that fill the gallery present a “music” far removed, of course, from *Apocalypse Now*’s Wagner or *Nocturnes* by Chopin. Young’s approach roots itself in the mid-20th-century avant-garde, a connection furthered by his musical scores. With circuitous transcriptions of *Nocturne* interspersed with military phraseology and imagery, the scores follow visually in the footsteps of composers from the 1950s and ’60s such as Earle Brown, John Cage, and Cornelius Cardew, whose “scores” were similarly pictorial — recognizable as music compositions because of staves and notes, but also worthy post-expressionist drawings in their own right. Crisp and diagrammatic, the scores nonetheless betray the messy tactility of Young’s practice with splashes of puddled watercolor.



Samson Young, “*Studies for Pastoral Music (M18 Claymore Entipersonnel Mine)*” (2015), pencil, ink, watercolor, and modeling paste on paper, 8 x 11.5 inches

The sound of Young's music follows these forebears as well: variegated, electro-acoustic, open to the environment through its Cage-ian implementation of silence. War's sound becomes music; moreover, like Cage's 4'33", it becomes atmosphere, easy to ignore: something most people would pay no attention to were it not in an art gallery. (To highlight this disjuncture, Young has placed radios broadcasting "real" war sounds, like the gunfire of "War Sounds – 1 Hour," in a corner.) Ultimately, Young's presence in itself — and the presence of his artistic labor — packs the biggest punch. Watching him work, one wonders about the human sources of the real war sounds; viewers see Young tap the drum or shake the "thunder tube" and extrapolate their known experiences of music instrument cause-and-effect onto their (in most cases) unknown experiences of the creation of real-world war noises.

So, what does war sound like? Who are the humans making those sounds? What do they look like? What might they look like in an art gallery? At a time when we engage with war and violence socially but from a distance, mitigated by internet-based political hot takes and media mistakes, Young's invocation to remember the defiantly human actions that construct war's real atmosphere rings loudly in an otherwise nearly silent gallery.



Samson Young, "Studies for Pastoral Music (Colt Walker Revolver 0.44 Caliber)" (2015), pencil, ink, watercolor, and modeling paste on paper, 8 x 11.5 inches

Pastoral Music continues at Team Gallery (47 Wooster St., Manhattan) through December 20.