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Multimedia exhibit brings the forest to Ruffin Gallery

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Charlottesville-based dancer Katie Schetlick in “spritewood” (video projection on raw plywood), part of the “WoodEar” exhibit. “Pieces like ‘WoodEar’ try to pull art into the idea that our relationship with technology can be critically considered and that it can generate new questions and new meanings,” said multimedia artist Peter Traub. Image courtesy of the artist

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**Sarah
Lawson**

<http://www.c-ville.com/autho>

8/27/14 at

What does it mean to digitally broadcast the ‘experience’ of a tree? Is satire inherent in such an act?” These are just a couple of the questions that Charlottesville-based artist Peter Traub hopes you’ll contemplate while viewing “WoodEar” at UVA’s Ruffin Gallery.

The exhibit is a recent collaboration between composer and multimedia artist Traub; dance artist, choreographer, and lecturer Katie Schetlick; and visual

10:00 AM

artist Jennifer Lauren Smith, who works in video, photography, and performance. Originally commissioned in 2012, the project received National Endowment for the Arts funding for its premiere at the Pace Digital Gallery and was also exhibited at The Bridge PAI earlier this year. The current installation was funded by the UVA Arts Council, and Traub assured that “this is the largest version of ‘WoodEar’ to date and has been significantly expanded and revised.”

Incorporating video, sound, graphics, and photographs, “WoodEar” centers on real-time influences collected from a single, living tupelo tree. Discussing the project’s origins, Traub notes that “we are surrounded by networked devices, but our default mode is to think of them as a means toward greater productivity, economic advantage, and interconnectedness.” Sensors and an Arduino controller on the tree collect and stream real-time data about environmental changes—including light, temperature, and humidity—to a computer, where it can be combined with a live audio feed from microphones also on the tree.

Traub agreed that this might be slightly intimidating for an art gallery exhibit. “I see one of my jobs as an electronic artist as being able to communicate in such a way that people who are new to it can feel that it is not beyond their capability to appreciate or understand,” he said. “At both Pace and The Bridge I met a number of people who didn’t quite know what to make of it at first, but were very interested and really wanted to know more—how it works, why I did it, where the art or composition is in the piece.”

The result is an immersive gallery installation that evolves in real-time to present multiple perspectives of digital and natural networks, drawing parallels between human and arboreal forms. “I wanted this show to be all about visual and sonic markers of summer. The sound recordings include a lot of birds, lawn mowers, crickets, cicadas, and other summer wildlife,” said Traub. Dance is fused with the project through “spritewood,” a video projection in which Schetlick’s motions are portrayed in

a series of still photographs shot from fifteen feet in the air. Projected onto raw wood, Schetlick appears to be engrained in the wood itself. According to Smith, “From the outset, [Schetlick] focused on honest relationships between the human body and that of the tree, for instance, considering the changing shapes of a tree’s shade as stimuli for a dancer’s movement.”

A live dance performance with Schetlick and other dancers will be held during the opening reception for “WoodEar” on August 29 from 5:30-7:30pm in Ruffin Gallery. The opening provides an opportunity to meet the artists, but Traub also recommended that “if you can manage more visits to the piece over the course of the show, you should see it in different states. A warm sunny day will look and sound different from a cold overcast one.” The exhibit is on display through October 3.