

ART PAPERS

| NORTHEAST

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

By Paul Krainak

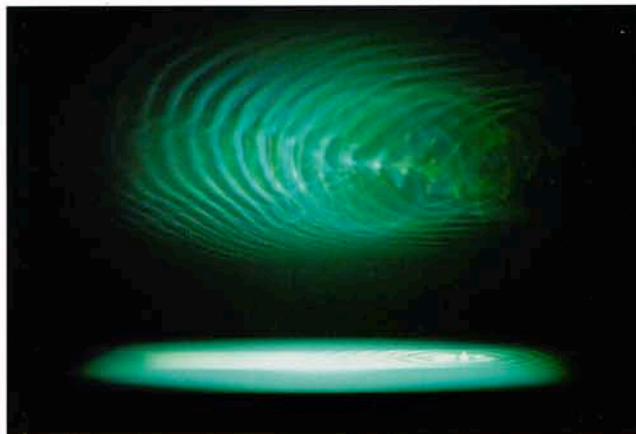
Quietly and assertively, Wood Street Galleries have moved to the forefront of a city recognized for its strong museums and for its support of installation and alternative media. The Mattress Factory, the Warhol Museum and the Miller Gallery have more space, but Wood Street's curator Murray Horne nonetheless consistently lands superb interdisciplinary projects that are more visually and technically complex and more intellectually engaging than the exhibitions found at those larger institutions. Funded by the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, the venue balances international stars with emerging artists whose work is critically plugged in and independent. This focus gives the gallery an identity: shows at "Wood Street" have few loose ends and no frivolous or overextended conceits. It's a haven for young architects of technological and cultural hybridity.

Four installations intertwine tableau and technology in **HI-TECH/LO-TECH (SIGHT AND SOUND FROM QUEBEC)** (March 26—May 15, 2004), radically extending familiar modernist themes of natural and built environments and clinical versus figural expression. Architect Thomas McIntosh and sound artist/composers Mikko Hynninen and Emanuel Madan worked with a Montreal engineering collaborative named "The User" to produce *Ondulation*. The entire group calls themselves **Plumbing for Beginners** and prides themselves on using what they refer to as "trailing-edge technology"—domestic plumbing, stage lighting, lasers—to produce astonishing, ethereal visual and sound experiences. *Ondulation* (2002) is a 30 by 12 foot elevated pool of milky white liquid (actually 100 gallons of tempera colored water pumped through a plumbing configuration just beneath its rippling surface). Water is driven from the center of the pool and floats over two hidden low frequency speakers at either end. A program produces alternating wave patterns that shift from nearly still to spurts of liquid that dance in front of low profile stage lights. A soundtrack of arhythmic

pulsation fades occasionally to reveal the sound of draining water and then builds theremin-like distortions that accompany rear projections of the pulsating water surface. The projected forms are reminiscent of sine waves or stress test patterns that appear and disappear like an encrypted aurora borealis. While the nearly alien stimuli of the apparatus, its afterimages and ambient sound provide a kind of sci-fi meditation chamber, minimalist design elements and concrete sound keep the audience's critical faculties from dissolving into the foam.

Diane Landry contributed the humorous and melancholic installation *Ecole d'Aviation* (2000) to the media mix. It consists of twenty-four freestanding stick figures with electrically propelled squeezebox feet and colorful umbrella hats. The unorthodox pedestals also drive the slow opening and closing of umbrellas, and generate a fluttering light source for the assembled contraptions, while a surprisingly haunting and sentimental sonorous drone fills the dimly lit gallery. A garden

insolent piece turns the drudgery of cleaning and polishing for others into a mess-making machine, sliming the vicinity with sweet smelling detergent. A working class caricature of the insubordinate computer in *2001: a space odyssey*, *Le grand ménage* imposes itself on a public that would prefer such maintenance remain invisible and anonymous. Gauthier's major new work is *Species: Rut* (2004), a totally enveloping installation of electrical conduit, contact microphones, fishing lures, tiny percussive devices, clamps and colored wire assembled in a billowing Pollock-like web. The viewer sets in motion a series of amplified sounds of tiny objects brushing against pebbled juice bottles and scraps of plywood strung amid the conduit, the speakers enhanced by galvanized pails, Styrofoam coolers and pie pans. As the artist intended, the intermittent chirping and buzzing recall a secluded pond of mating frogs. Like *Le grand ménage* and Landry's *Ecole d'Aviation*, *Species: Rut* suggests an anthropological site strewn with evidence of an



Plumbing for Beginners, Ondulation, 2002, mixed media installation, 30 by 12 feet (photo by Diana Shearwood courtesy the artists).

of earthbound airships, *Ecole d'Aviation*'s formation and movement is witty, childlike, decorative and disarmingly funereal.

Le grand ménage (2000) is one of two biomorphic works by **Jean-Pierre Gauthier** grounded in day-to-day experience. A small compressor slowly pumps air into open soap containers on this custodian's office cleaning cart (which has dismissed its operator), subsequently smothering the cart and assorted brushes with variegated bubbling spew. This hilarious,

earlier inexplicable event. Each installation exoticizes ordinary objects and experiences but doesn't mystify or corrupt the essential character of a wonderful anecdote. Gauthier and Landry are great storytellers, not because they trade in profound messages but because they know how to expedite the ways that new media's animated fictions can recuperate real time and real space.