

Julianne Swartz

**How**

**Deep**

**Is**

**Your**

One fine spring, I spent a canny Thursday in Poughkeepsie taking pictures. Nothing much was happening, and I blamed myself. Significance is infinite and I believe in temporary blindness and sunspot-related amnesia. I wasn't despairing, having found a mint copy of *The Late Great Townes Van Zandt* in a hospice thrift shop, but I was testy.

I rounded a corner just off the main drag and came upon an abandoned aquarium shop. Say those words: *Abandoned Aquarium Shop*. Through the window, I saw the oddest set of objects lying on the floor: colorful, amorphous blobs, some almost aquatic. It was a find, and my heart rate leapt. What mutations had rampant American capitalism left behind in its laboratory of fight and flight? The door was open and I slinked in, but was immediately confronted by several well-dressed people of my demographic. One said: "Hey, Tim, you came to see the show!" Alas, it was an off-site thesis exhibition for Vassar's art majors. Crestfallen, I looked at the sculptures with the empty eye of a father whose daughter has brought home an addict or an actuary, and left. It was only art.

Julianne Swartz's work always gives me exactly the opposite feeling. It is never only art, it is experience and sensation, visceral and giddy and thrilling, a thing that you see or hear as purely as lightning and thunder. This is not something I am used to feeling in museums, which are so often dominated by architectural grandeur and curatorial fussy budgets, but *Sound of Light*, Julianne's show at The Jewish Museum in 2008, managed to rake us through those glowy coals. I admit I went to the show expecting an *institutional critique*, so often a sly academic exercise in sanctioned subversion. But *Sound of Light* was critique only in the Greekest sense of the term, whose root refers to a turning of the soil. It wasn't lampooning the museum, it was aerating it.

When you entered the show, someone handed you a horn. Or was it an amphora? Or the uterus of one of those phosphorescent deep-sea fishes? Do fish have uteruses? In Julianne's world, they do. And with this glowing gift, you could hear the museum with unmitigated synesthesia. A Permanent Collection became a set of broadcasting beacons, made new by emotional bell peals. I know it's the wrong Testament, but the show felt like an answer to 1 Corinthians 12:27, "If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing?" which is one of many bible passages asking us not to strive too much. But, any Swartz is endlessly additive as it strives to make more meaning where there seems to be none. For Julianne, eyes are ears are ears are eyes, and the very air, even in a museum, is a medium for sending certain signals.

—Tim Davis