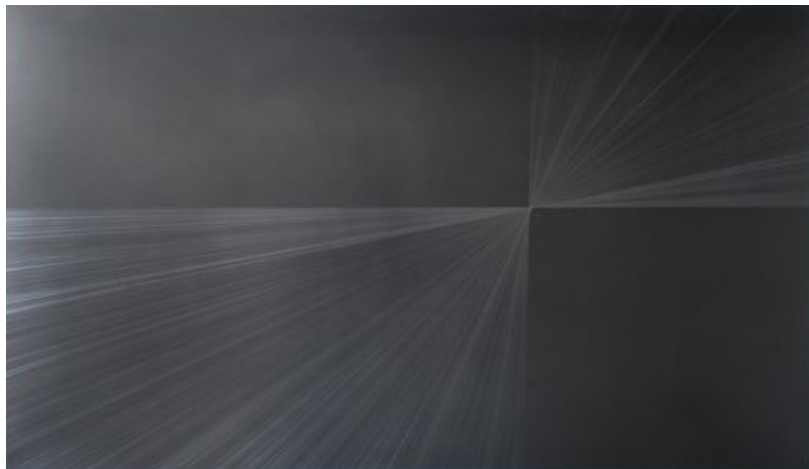


Art City: Chris Larson explores thresholds at The Ski Club

Rafael Francisco Salas, Special to the Journal Sentinel *December 19, 2016*



"Threshold drawing" from Chris Larson's exhibit at The Ski Club. (Photo: The Ski Club)

Chris Larson's artwork bears the soul of a gospel song and the edgy grubbiness of punk power ballads. Larson was a member of The House of Mercy, a gospel country group and house band at a church in St. Paul, Minnesota. Music, architecture and rhythm create harmony in Larson's work within an unconventional, minimalist aesthetic. Larson's current exhibit at The Ski Club bears no title, but as I walked through an architectural revision of the gallery, Larson repeatedly examined a theme of thresholds, figuratively and in fact.

One of Larson's signature gestures is to recreate and repeat, in some way similar to musical phrasing. For this exhibit Larson made a life-sized recreation of the Ski Club gallery in his mammoth studio in Minnesota and created the artwork for this show within this replica. The result is a renovation of the gallery in Milwaukee that affects how viewers move through it.

One enters a narrow, carpeted hallway upon crossing the threshold of the gallery. This skinny corridor deposits guests at a crossroads. Viewers can walk right or left, the gallery now divided into two separate spaces. The psychology of this architectural division seems to comment on dichotomy – of spirit, of intention and of choice.

One of the two newly divided spaces displays a blurry, black and white film, clacking and rattling from a vintage 16mm reel-to-reel projector. Ghostly film of Larson's studio has been split down the middle, flipped and spliced back together. The resulting image punctuates the concept of dichotomy and doubling, the two sides cohering only for the briefest moments during the film.

Nearby, Larson has created a humble sculpture on the floor. It is a pewter-colored casting of the threshold into Larson's studio. In isolation, and transformed into a new medium, this conventional object is transformed into a liminal barrier, existing neither inside or outside. The suggestion is that as one steps over or around it, they cross into another world entirely. I was surprised at the impact this artwork had on me.

The second gallery continues to reflect on passages and re-creation. A large, geometric graphite drawing of radiating lines is divided into quadrants. Larson once again used the threshold of a door, here as a straight edge, to create the lines. The darkness of the image strangely seemed to evoke light emanating from a distant source. Larson's minimalist marks produce grand interpretive possibilities. The drawing seems to carry metaphysical as well as formal weight. The connection to musical traditions remains palpable.

On the opposite wall is a photo of the recreated Ski Club that Larson put together like a stage set in his studio in St. Paul. Larson seems to be sensitive to viewers' experiences and allows them behind the curtain to see the process of creating the exhibit. The photo is helpful for this documentary purpose, but of course the process of the doubling of the gallery is an important component of the show overall.

The exhibit is sparse, each element emerging as a critical component. The carpet in the hallway was scavenged from Larson's studio and tacked to the Ski Club floor with ... an aluminum threshold. The cyclical rounds of content and material become exciting in subtle moments like these. That said, Larson's hallway is also adorned with an industrial fluorescent light, an element that has become ubiquitous in contemporary art exhibits. I would ban them if I had my way.

Larson's artwork is well established in the contemporary canon. He was included in the 2014 Whitney Biennial and he currently has a major exhibit on display at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The Ski Club has done well to bring Larson's crossover musical and artistic voice to Milwaukee.

The Larson exhibit is on view through Jan. 7 at The Ski Club, 3172 N. Bremen St. For more information visit www.theskiclubmilwaukee.com/.

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