

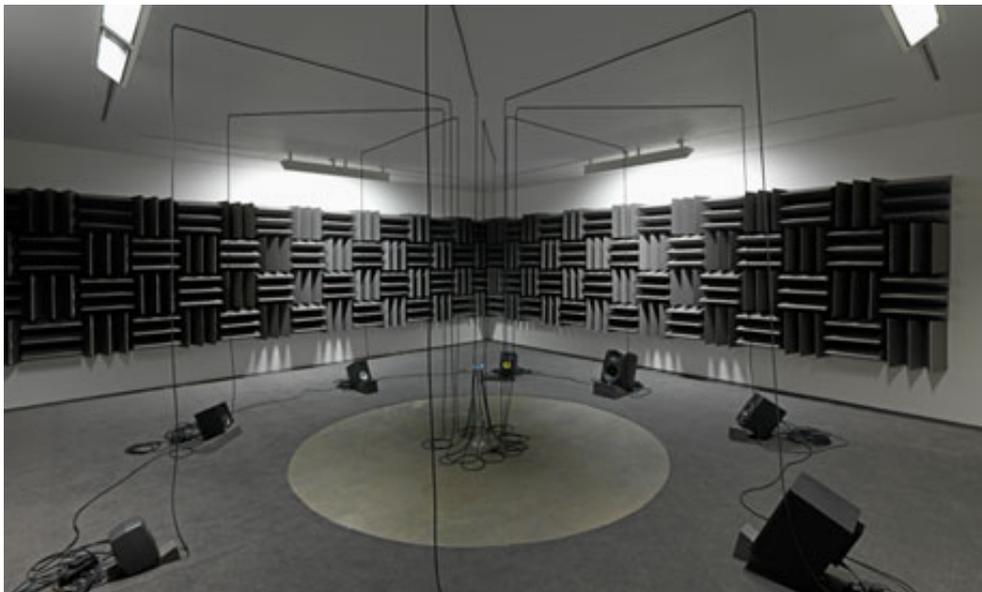
Haroon Mirza: vinyl, UFOs and the patter of tiny feet

From a room that replays the sound of ants crossing a copper plate to conversing speaker circles, Mirza's Lisson Gallery show is a riveting sonic adventure



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Surround sound ... Haroon Mirza's Adam, Eve and a UFO (2013). Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery

Often, I dance alone in my flat. How sad is that, you say, but I don't care. Feeling the beats pulsing through me, being taken over by dark rhythms or a voice, I sometimes fall over the furniture. Which is why I didn't risk dancing in Haroon Mirza's exhibition at the Lisson Gallery – though the whumffs and thuds beating around a circle of eight speakers in the upstairs gallery, all pointing inward, proved almost irresistible.

A column of sound rose in the centre of the space. I wanted to be there, surrounded, but there was too much stuff in the way: the foam sound-baffles on the walls, the speakers on the floor, the "UFO circuit" (I have no idea what a UFO is in electronic

terms, but it looks pretty with its pulsing lights) and all the cables festooned about the place crowded me out. Following the aural conversation criss-crossing the room from speaker to speaker (each one different) made me feel I was in some swanky hi-fi studio, being given a demo of the system that's right for me.

Let's try the reverberation chamber instead, a shiny, all-white room. Clap your hands and the echo is a hard and immediate ricochet. A panel speaker hangs from the ceiling and a tubular LED light leans casually against a wall. The light comes on and off, but it is nothing like Martin Creed's famous work. I was alone in there, except for an ant. I only saw it for a moment before the light went out. It looked stunned. Perhaps it was dead.

When the light comes on, it is accompanied by a shushing sound that gets louder as the light dies away to darkness. We are left in an abrupt silence that reminded me of Beckett's Breath. When the light came on again the ant was still there, an inert speck on a glass ledge inside something like an old-fashioned paraffin lamp, or perhaps a crack pipe, on the floor. It is an ant farm. When an ant wanders over a copper plate inside, the pitter-pattering of its miniscule feet is mixed in with the sound of water: something like rain, or the noise inside a shower. That's what we hear when the light comes on.



In vinyl veritas ...

from Haroon Mirza's *Sitting in a Chamber* (2013). Photo: Ken Adlard

I stayed in there for a long time, bemused. Then later, on the street, looking in through the window, I saw the exterior shell of Mirza's chamber in a sealed off part of the gallery. A showerhead has been plumbed into the wall, gushing water into a plastic dustbin. A microphone relays the noise of the shower into the chamber, along with the ants' footfalls. That's the sound you hear when the light comes on.

Originally, this peculiar work had the title *Pavilion for a Beautiful Nuisance*. This has now been changed to *Pavilion for Optimisation*. Ant noises; water; reverb. Is this a

kind of found and manipulated music? It is the sound of something approaching as the light fades away. The reverb in the room makes me feel exposed.

In another part of the gallery stands an array of turntables, the needles juddering over various doctored vinyl and handmade records, all played by an invisible DJ. One turntable has been adapted to set off electronic wails, like a bird calling from high up in a jungle canopy. You'd go mad if you had to listen all day, and the whole thing has a doomy, repetitive beat. Amid it all is a recorded voice, from far away and long ago.

In 1969, the American minimalist composer Alvin Lucier sat alone in a room, and recorded a brief statement: "I am sitting in a room, different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed ..." Lucier played back his voice, rerecorded it and played it back again. He repeated the process until his voice became a quivering abstract resonance equivalent in sound to the room itself. Lucier had a slight speech impediment; I Am Sitting in a Room was an attempt to smooth out his own speech defects. You can hear him hesitating over the word rhythm. It sounds like he is speaking from inside an echo chamber, or his words are being manipulated by a DJ. There's a clue here to the whole of Mirza's show.

Mirza has remixed Lucier's recording, compounding the composer's degenerated voice with the other sounds in the gallery: the beats of a needle bouncing over tape glued to a record, a long foghorn boom from another prepared disc. This is Lucier, the dubstep remix. I tried dancing, but the tempo made me feel like a slow-mo zombie on downers.

On a website dedicated to this show are a number of fascinating essays about Mirza's work. David Toop on insects, architecture, gamelan and frog choruses, and much besides. Art critic Ossian Ward on DJing is also particularly good. Mirza is a DJ too. You can be one as well, because the website features a number of samples from which you can mix your own music and upload it via SoundCloud and on to the website. Jellyman from the band Django Django has already made a version.

Mirza's work is doing the rounds. He crops up everywhere – he has another show opening at the Hepworth in Wakefield this week. It is much more than a case of plug it in and turn it on. He's a sampler and a remixer, a scratch DJ of minimalist art and music, of John Cage and dub reggae soundsystems, a rethinker of bricolage and old-fashioned avant garde audio experiment. Mirza might be a bit of an equipment fetishist, but you've got to love the stuff you use. As much as he quotes, he reinvents. Isn't that something art, and music, literature and dance, always does? Just about able to set up a hi-fi system myself, my appreciation of decks and speakers, or the finer points of the turntablist's art, are barely minimal. Just spin me a few platters and I'll

have a go.

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