

HAROON MIRZA: ON THE CREST OF A WAVE

Waves – whether sound or light, electrical or in water – are captivating. Their beauty has fascinated artist Haroon Mirza, who devoted his latest exhibition to them.

From October to January, John Hansard Gallery (JHG) presented a major solo exhibition by Mirza, an internationally-renowned artist and a Winchester School of Art alumnus.

The exhibition, called *Waves and Forms* took over all of the gallery spaces and highlighted the artist's ongoing exploration of waveforms. Mirza addressed how waveforms are perceived, the emotional and physical responses they create and the various ways in which we relate to them.

Mirza has won acclaim for installations that test the interplay and friction between sound and light waves and electric current. He devises kinetic sculptures, performances and immersive installations. One example is *The National Apavillion of Then and Now* (2011) – an anechoic chamber with a circle of light that grows brighter in response to an increasing drone, and completely dark when there is silence. This installation won the Silver Lion award at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011.

Mirza was born in 1977 in London where he lives and works. His connection to the University of Southampton was established when he studied BA Fine Art at Winchester

School of Art (1999–2002). He then studied MA Design Critical Practice and Theory at Goldsmiths University of London (2006) and MA Fine Art at Chelsea College of Arts (2007). His links to the University, and particularly the Institute of Sound and Vibration Research (ISVR), have had a lasting impact and influence on his artistic practice.

Mirza describes his role as a composer, manipulating electricity, a live, invisible and volatile phenomenon, to make it dance to a different tune and calling on instruments as varied as household electronics, vinyl and turntables, LEDs, furniture, video footage and existing artworks to behave differently. *Waves and Forms* filled JHG's spaces with new and reconfigured artworks focussing on sound, light, electricity and water, and the interaction between these varying waveforms.

Another of Mirza's installations to explore waves was entitled *WAVES* (2017). This installation was composed of four channels of video, 12 channels of audio, 8 channels of LEDs, a chamber housing a water feature and a chandelier – which all came together to make a single artwork. The zigzag form of the title *WAVES* is a typographic



Main photo: *Dreamachine 2.0* (2019), installation view, *Waves and Forms*, John Hansard Gallery. Courtesy hrm199 (Siobhan Coen and Haroon Mirza). Photo: Thierry Bal

1 Haroon-Mirza, *The National Apavillion of Then and Now* (2011), installation view, Venice Biennale 2011. Courtesy hrm199 and Lisson Gallery. Photo: Kiki Triantafyllou



“Winchester School of Art and the University of Southampton is a very good place to study for an undergraduate degree. In particular, it has good proximity to the ISVR which was my first encounter with an anechoic chamber when I first started working with acoustic space. Anechoic chambers have been used in some of my works since.”

Haroon Mirza

interpretation of the astrological sign Aquarius and translates as a geometric version of a wave. This artwork responds to both the constellation and astrological sign, as well as the ‘Age of Aquarius’, which the earth is about to enter and signifies a time of rediscovered harmony. Through the videos and installation structures of *MMMM*, Mirza highlights ideological conflict, science, shamanism and artificial intelligence. These channels are combined with electrical signal illuminating LEDs and generate sound simultaneously to create a live and immersive audio-visual installation.

Another of Mirza’s pieces, entitled *Pavilion for Optimisation* (2013), centred around a purpose-built reverberation chamber – a room with hard surfaces and non-parallel walls that is designed to create maximum reverberation and disperse sound. Through this artwork, Mirza explores the relationship between seeing and hearing, and highlights the relativity of our perceptions. *Pavilion for Optimisation* represents the natural systems that inspired optimisation algorithms used in science, mathematics and technology to maximise efficiency. Amplified analogue sounds from flowing water and an ant colony are heard in the reverberation chamber. Linked with the intensifying LED lights, sound and light are isolated from their origins, challenging our auditory and visual perceptions.

2 *MMMM* (2017), installation view, *Waves and Forms*, John Hansard Gallery. Courtesy hrm199. Photo: Thierry Bal

3 *Pavilion for Optimisation* (2013), installation view, *Waves and Forms*, John Hansard Gallery. Courtesy hrm199. Photo: Thierry Bal



A new commission at JHG was *Dreammachine* 2.0, an audio-visual system created to induce dreamlike states devised by Siobhan Coen and Haroon Mirza. This artwork was developed in homage to the *Dreamachine*, a device that induces hallucinations, originally created by Brion Gysin, William S. Burroughs and Ian Sommerville in 1961.

The original *Dreamachine* was composed of a cylindrical form, with holes cut out of its surface, rotating on a turntable. A light bulb suspended in its centre radiated flickering light around the room, causing hallucinations when viewed with closed eyes. Siobhan Coen, initially reimagined this historical device using computer driven LEDs. During a residency at hrm199, Mirza’s studio platform, Coen and Mirza introduced sound into the LED system, working with frequencies relating to the brain’s electrical activity. In consultation with neuroscientists at Imperial College London, the pair developed an audio-visual version of the *Dreamachine* in which constantly changing frequencies of light and sound waves produced increasingly complex images in the mind of the viewer.

The exhibition *Waves and Forms* was made possible through support from the Barker-Mill Foundation and University of Southampton’s Public Engagement with Research unit (PERu) (See page 28 for a Spotlight piece on PERu). *Waves and Forms* is subsequently touring to Aberdeen Art Gallery later this year.

Following his exhibition at JHG, Haroon Mirza and Dr Nikhil Mistry, Research Fellow in Underwater Acoustics, are working together towards a new installation specifically for the ISVR’s Audio Lab. The installation will explore the use of sound for therapy, as well as the interaction of different sounds and light and the effect on how we perceive them, sparking discussion on the relationship between the sounds we hear and our wellbeing.