

Arc Resonates with the Arctic's Odd Tones

Mysterious musical phenomena echo through sculptor Gwen Boyle's new installation

VISUAL ARTS

Gwen Boyle

At the Or Gallery until July 30

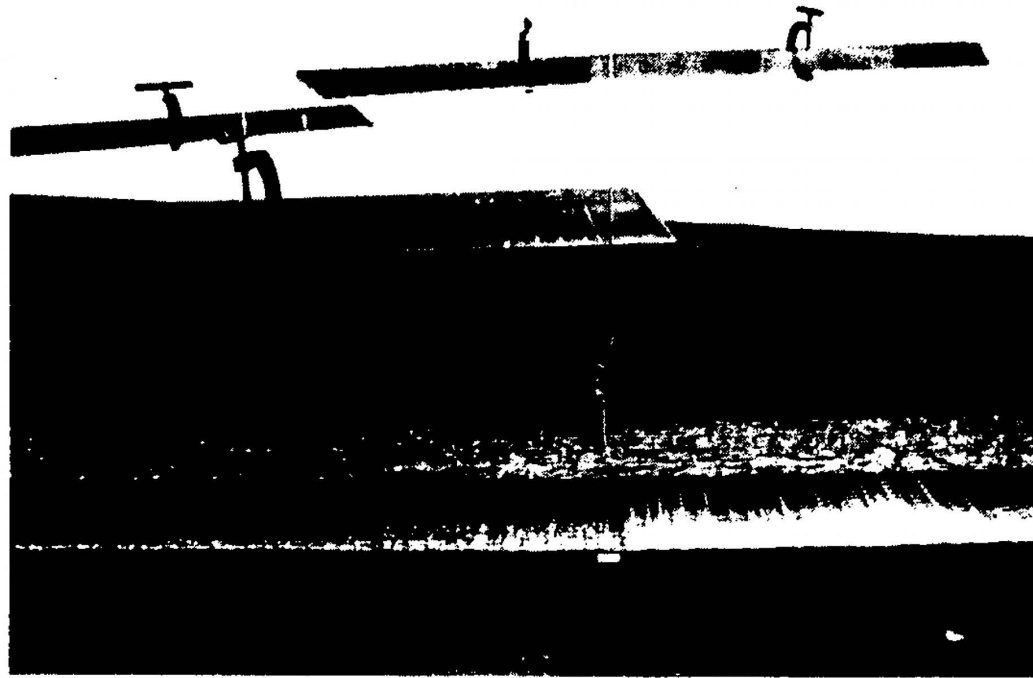
• BY PAULA GUSTAFSON

In June 1989, when Vancouver artist Gwen Boyle suspended a magnetized steel bow on the Arctic shoreline of Cornwallis Island, she anticipated that the bow would gyrate like a compass spinning out of control. She didn't expect her kinetic sculpture would sing.

In her journal on that momentous June 15, she described the phenomenon. "It's 2 a.m., air is still, in the silence my boots crunch rocks and ice as I install a sculpture on an exposed cracked mezoic [sic] rock.... Holding the magnetic steel bar my hair starts to crackle with electricity. A faint electronic sound sings out from this magnetized steel bow. What's happening... it's responding to the... what? Out here on this seemingly empty tundra I was alone, excited, mystified and spooked."

Later, after completing the installation of the aluminum tripod from which the three-foot-long steel bow was hung with fishing line, she noted that the harmonics continued to resonate along the shore, as if the sculpture were "tuning" the shimmering sea ice. Rising and drifting in and out of the cold whistle of the wind, the mysterious harmonic sounds have since been compared to whale songs and to the electronic transmissions sent back by *Voyager* on its orbit around Mars.

In Arc, at the Or Gallery, Boyle has re-created the elements of her Arctic experience: the tripod sculpture, the shimmering sea ice, and the miragelike, haunting harmonics. Although the sculptural components and the sounds from the audiotape fill the 600-square-foot gallery space, the exhibition feels as spare and as shiveringly spiritual as a frozen sea-edge landscape.



Suspended sheets of icy-green glass suggest the Arctic landscape in sculptor Gwen Boyle's Or Gallery installation, Arc. An eerie found soundtrack recorded in the vastness of the frozen North completes the feeling of timeless space.

"We land within seven degrees of the geomagnetic pole, and we have a couple of hours before the ice becomes unsafe. Out of this sea ice, the light is even more intense and pure, everything is sharp edged, even the ice crystals in the air. I've lost my sense of perspective, what is far seems so near. The silence is silencing. I sit listening. In this light I see the Arctic's long unbroken bow of time."

Boyle has crystallized this excerpt from her journal—a description of a sensory experience—by suspending C-clamps holding 10 long segments of icy-green laminated glass from the gallery ceiling. These hanging horizon lines float like ice floes in the air, casting shadows and an occasional eye-dazzling glint from their refractory surfaces.

As Boyle's daughter, Melanie, suggests in the exhibition brochure (an objet d'art in its own right, elegantly designed by Val Speidel), the simple form of the five-metre-high tripod and the structure of the laminated glass sculptures "strike a balance between formal abstraction and technical engineering". Each component of the sculptural installation is a fully conceived composition. With the addition of the eerie soundtrack, Arc evokes the High Arctic as a site of meditation and wonder.

The high-pitched bow song almost didn't get documented. Since she hadn't anticipated her sculpture would resonate, Boyle didn't travel with any recording equipment on her 2,000-mile journey to the international Polar Continental Shelf Pro-

ject. The geologists and other researchers at the camp (who were as mystified as Boyle was by the unexpected harmonics) had brought lots of scientific gear, but none for recording sound. Serendipitously, a film crew from Edmonton happened to drop by the camp on the last day Boyle was scheduled to spend on Cornwallis Island. The Karvonen Films crew had recording equipment with them and generously offered to tape the ethereal music.

Boyle subsequently met composer and filmmaker Robert MacNevin, who was intrigued by Boyle's discovery. As he wrote for Boyle's Tuning exhibition at the Richmond Art Gallery in late October 1993: "What made this sound fascinating (goose bump material) was that it was being

produced not by a composer with all the latest technological wizardry (as interesting as that would be) but by the earth itself. This bar was unexpectedly giving voice to the earth's magnetism, which qualifies as a very interesting, natural phenomenon in and of itself. The bar and the earth were singing together. The idea seemed to resonate with the serenity, elegance, and timelessness of Gwen's sculpture."

The original tape had a lot of low-frequency wind noise, which MacNevin was able to filter out, allowing the harmonics to emerge like the spindrift of aurora borealis colours. Gallerygoers who listen closely will hear slow cross-fades between the original taped sound, with the bow song rising above the low rumble of the wind, and the purer, filtered version.

As yet, there is no scientific explanation for the harmonics, although speculation suggests they are somehow related to the discovery site (a region of concentrated magnetic forces approximately seven degrees from the magnetic North Pole) and to the fact that mid-1989 was near the peak of a 12-year period of intense solar-flare activity.

"When I landed on Cornwallis Island in June 1989, the place was frozen," Boyle recalls. "When I left in July, the flowers were coming out and there were those tiny little forests, like bonsai trees, all covering the ground. But even on the mornings when the tripod and steel bow were covered with ice, the bow would hum."

Five years after her Arctic adventure, Boyle is continuing to explore the connections between intangible energy forces. Arc, she says, is an experiment in communicating her discovery to an urban audience, to bring into human terms the wind, the sun, and the Earth's gravity, magnetism, wobble, and rotation. "Usually the only way we hear about Arctic phenomena is through the scientists," Boyle points out. ■