Sound and light featured in Alternator exhibitions

Two artists who work with sound, light and technology — one using lasers and the other video installation — invite the public to play with their work at the Alternator Gallery for Contemporary Art.

Robyn Moody creates what he calls a laser harp - lasers are attached to speakers that play simple sounds or phonemes from English, Dutch, German and French when visitors break the beams with their hands.

Moody, who grew up in Lethbridge, Alta., describes lasers as threatening yet sensuous and beautiful. "To touch them flirts with danger and brings delight," he says. "Lasers are sexy."

Two banks of lasers, one on each side of the darkened gallery, emit red beams that become more visible when visitors trigger a motion-sensitive fog machine.

The batteries powering the lasers have been running down quickly, requiring frequent recharging, but when the harp is working it creates sounds that are reminiscent of the vocal exercises on language tapes (plucking one beam) and the babble of a crowd at a cocktail party (plucking many simultaneously).

Visitors who try to make recognizable words — indeed, the premise of a recognizable phrase is one of the lures of the piece — will find it surprisingly difficult.

"The harp consists of 48 strings equaling 48 phonemes — an arbitrary number based partially on my bank balance," says Moody, who has worked as a technical assistant to two of Canada's leading contemporary artists, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller.

Moody, now based in Halifax, where he earned his master's degree in fine arts earlier this year, plans to expand the installation so it includes the 80 sounds in the international phonetic language. Creating a variety of intonations and pitches, while technically challenging, would also create a richer experience.

 Meanwhile, Toronto artist Teresa Ascencio invites viewers to participate in her video installation, Glowing Madonna. Inspired by glow-in-the-dark figurines of the Virgin Mary, the piece continues her examination of gender constructs from the cultural perspective of her Portuguese-Asian family.

The video, screened in the dark, juxtaposes close-up shots of tree foliage with images of a larger-than-life woman wearing a flowing dress in a large church. At one point the woman invites viewers to go into the light. When they move forward, their bodies block light from the projector, leaving their shadows on the panels after they move away. The shadows fade quickly, allowing the process to be repeated.

The woman's appearance seeks to occupy an ambiguous position between Madonna, the famous pop singer, and Madonna, the classical saintly female form, suggesting conflicting role models for contemporary women.

Lorne Roberts, a Winnipeg arts writer, notes in the exhibition essay that the natural world and the female figure are in stark contrast.

"The soothing quality of the natural world calls attention to the superficial values of the religion that is pop culture, alluding to a quest for something deeper, something with meaning, amidst the glare of media flashbulbs," he says.

Ascencio, who was born in Brazil, created an earlier video, Portrait of a Young Bulldog, which explored the cult of machismo. Then she turned her attention to lenticular photography, used in 3-D Catholic sacrament cards, to explore religion and female sexual taboo.

Ascencio, who has exhibited her work in galleries in Montreal, Vancouver and Toronto, has a fine arts degree from the University of Toronto.

The exhibitions continue to July 15.

-- Portia Priegert is a freelance writer and visual artist.

Quick hit

What: Glowing Madonna by Teresa Ascencio and Harp: phase 1 by Robyn Moody

Where: Alternator Gallery for Contemporary Art

When: To July 15 Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday

Info: 889-2288 or www.alternatorgallery.com

Portia Priegert/Video photo

Robyn Moody has created what he calls a laser harp, on display at Alternator Gallery.