

Winter solstice focus of artists' live performance

Last Sunday was the winter solstice, the longest night of the year and the point at which the sun is farthest away from the celestial equator, about to begin its seasonal journey from the southern hemisphere to the north as the earth spins and tilts on its axis.

The ancient Chinese called this long night when the sun seems to stand still "the time of the ghost." And to mark the occasion Houston artists Michael Galbreth and Kevin Cunningham conducted a 12-hour performance piece that was to end at 10:02 p.m., the time of solstice.

The event, which took place at DiverseWorks Gallery, 214 Travis, was a moving, eerily effective and largely solitary performance during which Galbreth was locked in a wood-and-glass box.

Galbreth received his master's of fine arts in video and sculpture from the University of Houston in 1984 and has collaborated on experimental music and video performances in Houston. Last summer the 30-year-old artist observed the summer solstice by partially burying himself under a circular mound of earth for 12 hours in the Commerce Street Warehouse downtown. Galbreth said he was attempting to feel the tilt of the earth as its orientation began to shift.

Last December Galbreth and Jack Massing, another graduate of the UH art department, collaborated on an installation at Butler Gallery that used many of the same ancient astronomical signs as the recent piece at DiverseWorks.

Kevin Cunningham, Galbreth's collaborator this time, received his bachelor's of fine arts in sculpture from UH and is working on his master's in the creative writing program there. Cunningham, who is working on a 6-foot-tall book, got involved in Galbreth's work when he became interested in documenting Galbreth's thoughts while acting out his 12-hour performances.

The winter solstice piece last Sunday — a continuation, said Galbreth, of last summer's solstice performance — was called *A Voice Comes to One in the Dark*, a line suggested by Cunningham and taken from a prose narrative by

Susan Chadwick

ART



Samuel Beckett titled *Company*. The story is about the faint and random thoughts that come to a man who is lying in the dark, much as Galbreth was at DiverseWorks.

The windows of the upstairs gallery were darkened with shades for the performance, which began at 10:02 a.m., and when I arrived at about 5:45 p.m. the entire room was dark except for the small desk lamp where Cunningham was working. Galbreth, swathed entirely in white, lay in the glass box on top of a white-painted table that was suspended in the air with wires, and underneath the table there also was a light.

This light cast a ghostly white glow about the area, illuminating a grid of white lines on the floor beneath Galbreth. The grid formed a 3,000-year-old 20-year Hebrew solar calendar or calculator. Its structure, called "squaring the sun," was a square containing 36 smaller squares in which were set small piles of white rocks varying in number from one to 36. The number of stones in each row horizontally and vertically add up to 11; the stones in the 20 perimeter boxes add up to 365, and so on, all calculations that are celestial measurements.

In the middle of the grid was set a small compass, and around the edges of the square were drawn arcs in salt. The arcs turned the square into a circle and vice-versa; the salt, Galbreth explained later, is the material of alchemy, a healing material, and a symbol of life and order because of its crystalline structure.

Strung on invisible wires above the rocks and salt were numerous leafless, dead tree branches, the signs of winter. And in the midst of this entire scene, suspended in his box in the air as if weightless, lay Galbreth, swaddled in white like a ghost, a sick spirit or non-person, with white gloves and white head covering and white socks.

The box, which had small holes on the side for breathing, was too short for his 6-foot-4-inch frame and too shallow for him to lie in

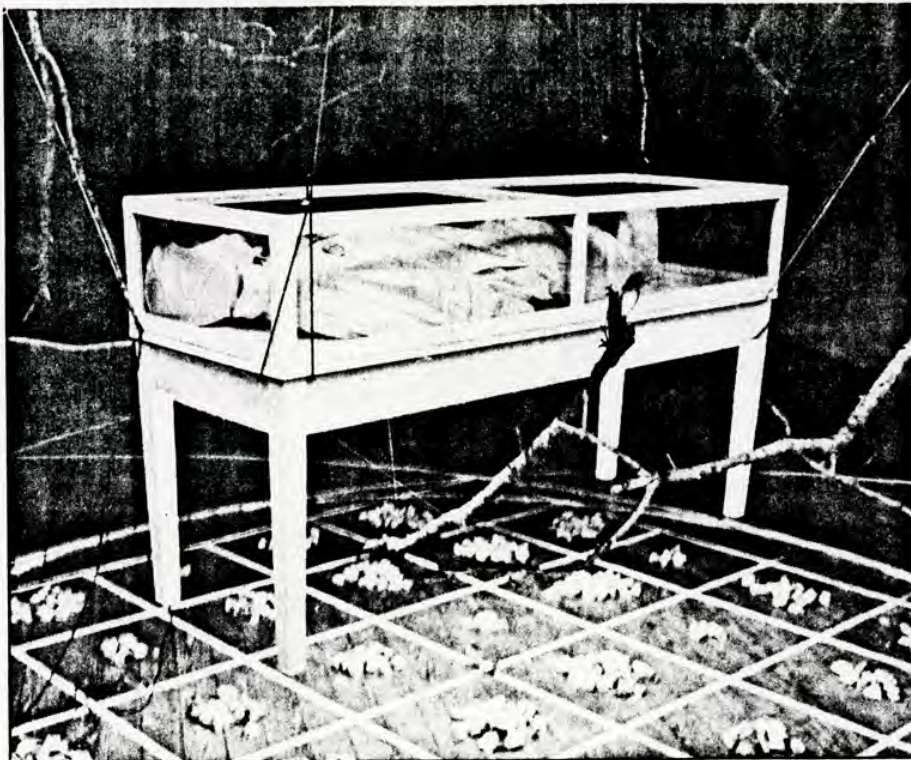


Photo by T. Ventura

Houston artists Michael Galbreth and Kevin Cunningham conducted a 12-hour performance piece at DiverseWorks Gallery with Galbreth locked in a wood-and-glass box.

any way but on his back. Already he had been in the box for almost eight hours when I saw him, and as he shifted painfully about in his trap, the table and all the branches lurched and danced awkwardly in the air.

Galbreth held a small microphone in his hand that attached him by voice to Cunningham, who was sitting on the other side of the room like a mad scientist jotting down notes and drawing in a large book. Cunningham, who didn't leave his position for 12 hours, sat in a large, curved antique chair at a matching desk next to a short sidetable. On the sidetable was a pendulum clock and a small brass desk lamp that cast a tight circle of light on Cunningham's papers, and on the desk were two glowing computer terminals, one of which beeped loudly and displayed the time in hours, minutes and seconds.

The effect of the scene that Cunningham occupied was in marked contrast to the ritual setup of Galbreth's. Cunningham, who wore headphones and played with the audio-visual equipment that recorded the event, seemed to be in another period entirely, a romantic time poised on the edge of modern science. Galbreth, in his stark white, geometric setting, was immersed in a primitive, almost magical ritual. Though it was only early evening, both of them seemed to be functioning with an obsessive intensity more characteristic of the deep of night.

As I watched, the only outside observer there, I could here Galbreth breathing and muttering, talking about his discomfort and other things. "I'm still here," he mumbled. And then, a few minutes later, "Six thirty, hopefully. Ten o'clock, wishfully."

I tiptoed over and looked into the book Cunningham was work-

ing on. On some of the pages in large letters he had written down things such as "It's getting too dark" and "We are in pain."

Later Galbreth told me in an interview that he was unable to finish the piece. During the first four hours he thought of trivial things, a movie he'd seen and model airplanes he'd made as a boy. But after that, he said, he could think of nothing other than his discomfort. Two hours before the performance was to end he had to get out of the box. The holes did not let in sufficient air and his body had heated up what air there was so that it was suffocating.

"I was supposed to concentrate on the event," said Galbreth, who had fasted beforehand. "For this piece the idea was for me to slow down and be in sync with the earth and something occurring."

"What really occurs is the noise of the mind. I thought mostly

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about my discomfort being in that situation. But we thought that's OK, because that's the way people are."

Still, Galbreth said he feels special about the piece. Modern science and technology has brought us to the threshold of escaping the earth and moving onward, he said. The ancients had different ways of measuring the movements of the earth, he added, and his fascination is with these different systems, both modern and ancient.

"To me, it's all kind of magic." Galbreth and Cunningham plan to do something with the documentation of their unusually effective performances, but as yet they have not decided what.

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