

**Shannon Collis** is a Canadian artist currently residing in Baltimore, MD. A graduate of the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Collis is also completing research at Concordia University in Montréal in the area of Digital Media and Computation Arts (Fall 2013). Currently, she is an Assistant Professor of Art at the University of Maryland, where she teaches Digital Foundations and Print Media. Her studio practice focuses on creating installations and interactive environments that explore various ways in which digital technologies can transform our perception of audio and visual stimuli. Her work has been exhibited across North America as well as in Europe, Asia and Australia.

**Darren Copeland** is a Canadian sound artist creating work for radio, performance, and installation with a focus on soundscape composition and multichannel spatialization. He is the Artistic Director of New Adventures in Sound Art, a year-round presenter of sound art at the Artscape Wychwood Barns in Toronto.

**Open Studio**, Canada's leading printmaking centre, is dedicated to the production, preservation and promotion of contemporary fine art prints.

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**September 13 - October 12, 2013**  
Opening Reception: Friday, September 13, 6:30 - 8:30 pm

# Shannon Collis: Overtones



*Frequencies (detail), frosted Mylar, tactile transducer, tone generator, silicone carbide. 6 pieces, 14" x 14" each, 2012.*

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## Multisensory Overtones — the Work of Shannon Collis

by Darren Copeland

Shannon Collis' exhibition *Overtones*, at Open Studio expands on traditional printmaking. She does this not by using digital media technologies but by integrating sound through all aspects of the production process and broadening printmaking into a multisensory experience.

In her statement for the exhibition she explains that she is "investigating the sonic behaviours of different material surfaces when agitated by a variety of kinetic, mechanical devices." For Collis, the techniques and processes of printmaking provide as many sonic materials as visual. The sonic and visual are on an equal footing. As she goes on to say, "I have developed... ways to interact with sound on a physical level, to make audible, the visual qualities of mechanical and hand-generated marks."

The resulting form of her works is the outcome of a physical interplay between the sonic and the visual. Sound and vision share a material essence in her work — they are not separate modalities choreographed or synthesized together in a way that imposes a shared manufactured identity. The resulting visual pattern is the product of the sonic interaction that takes place while producing the visual shape. And the sonic experience is in turn informed by the visual pattern being created.

Technological artwork today carries similar forms of interrelationships between multiple sensory modalities, but often in contemporary media art, the fusion and synthesis occurs in the digital manipulation of numbers. This is evident in contemporary animation and videomusic (or visual music) work, in which the disciplinary boundaries between sound and video production are beginning to dissolve. The boundaries also dissolve in Collis' case, but the refreshing feature of her work is that the bonding of visual and sonic practice happens in the physical material realm — a feature of digital media production that is typically reduced and over-simplified.

The alchemy of sonic and visual materials in her work is also the result of the artist's physical intervention during the process of production. Her work is not made from a stand-alone algorithm or even a recipe that she is merely executing. Her work is the result of a complex and dynamic interaction, which leads to results that the artist is not able to predict ahead of time. The process defies repeatability. The artist is as much part of the medium as she is the one that is helping to shape the result.

There are historical precedents for Collis' work and ways of working, but they are found more in the history of experimental film than in printmaking or sound art. For example, there is a connection to Oskar Fischinger's experiments with drawing patterns of ornamental shapes onto thin outer layers of film stock in order to produce an early form of electronic visual music in 1932. Similarly, the work of Daphne Oram and her elaborate Oramics Machine developed between 1957 and 1962 in Britain could be attributed as a defining influence on Collis. In fact, with her work *Iterations*, Collis has effectively created her own optical synthesizer not too dissimilar to the Oramics Machine.

Frequencies, 14 lithographs, 14" x 14" each, 2012.



However, there is a distinction between Collis' work and the interest of Fischinger, Oram and other early animators in their pursuit of a "visual music." The difference is that Collis is hearing and seeing the result as she interacts with her medium. Her work is not inscribed like a score and then experienced at a later time. It is a real-time improvisation between the artist and her materials. The artist is a participant in the making of a form whose shape is to be determined through a real-time process that at any point could go in an unintended direction. The artist is part of a dynamic, responsive and reciprocal system of play.

Her thinking about sound goes beyond the strategy evident in more stratified multidisciplinary applications of sound and vision, such as a conventional Hollywood movie soundtrack, which uses sound as ornamentation and a means to manipulate moods and feelings. Her auditory imagination blends the construction of the visual form with the production of the auditory result. The two are inseparable, making the mark-making process in printing also an act of sound-making and vice versa. In her work *At Intervals*, she employs small motors and wires to "etch the surface of steel plates, while contact microphones amplify the sonic activity."

In her work *Soundlines*, Collis' goal of capturing a sense of the expressive and intuitive nature of drawing and its "layering of material residue" is reflected in a complex layering of sounds. The inherent sonic qualities in the process of printmaking are a fundamental variable in determining the final form of her work. There are many sounds and visual forms that support the creation of artwork in the studios of artists, but these often go unnoticed. It is rare that they are the basis of the work as they are with Collis. This is due to a recognition that the sounds created during the process of making the visual elements are not noise, or an intrusive by-product, but rather in its agitations and outbursts are an enveloping force latent with expressive sonic potential.