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This art exhibit in the Philly suburbs really nails it, carpenter-style

by Edith Newhall, Updated: November 14, 2019



KRISTON JAE BETHEL / FOR THE INQUIRER



If you are looking for a reason to get out to Collegeville, there are four terrific shows on exhibit at Ursinus College's Berman Museum of Art.

The biggest and boldest is *Music for 150 Carpenters*, a site-specific multimedia work celebrating the college's 150th anniversary and the museum's 30th birthday.

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Conceived by the Berlin-based American sound artist Douglas Henderson and commissioned by Berman director Charles Stainback, it was initially a 30-minute live performance where Henderson conducted an orchestra of 150 players — actual carpenters, local artists, and Ursinus faculty, staff, and students — in a symphony of sounds produced by hammering nails into sawhorses, opening and shutting lunch boxes, and jiggling tools in carpenter's aprons.

Since then, that performance has lived on in an uncanny facsimile. A video of the performance shot from overhead is continuously projected onto the gallery's floor, while the recorded audio is played in multichannel surround sound. The well-used sawhorses, hammers, nails, aprons, and lunch boxes still occupy their original spots.

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I wouldn't want to be the museum assistant stationed at the Berman's entrance — hearing hammering all day long would drive me up the wall, symphonically arranged or not — but Henderson's remarkable composition kept me spellbound for the full 30 minutes.

Also at the Berman is "David Scher: The Tool-bag Years," a small exhibition of the Brooklyn-based artist's whimsical ink-and-watercolor drawings of carpenters at work. It's a perfect complement to *Music for 150 Carpenters*, and so is "Harry Bertoia: Sculptor of Sound," featuring the Pennsylvania artist's early prints and drawings, his "sonambient" metal sculptures, and his recordings of acoustic tones produced by those sculptures.

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Here, too, is "Stephanie Rowden: The Collection Speaks," displaying artworks from the museum's collection selected by Rowden, a Michigan artist known for sculptures and installations using sound. It's a diverse group of works linked by the use of patterns. One standout is Françoise Gilot's ink-on-paper *Self-Portrait with Hair in Bun*, with its supremely confident, simple lines.

All on exhibit through mid-March and beyond (closing dates vary) at Philip and Muriel Berman Museum of Art, Ursinus College, 601 E. Main St., Colleville, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Tues.-Sun. 610-409-3500 or ursinus.edu/berman.

Staples of the art scene