

ART REVIEW: Adrian Nivola's Fanciful Instrument Sculptures are Ideal Art for Music Lovers

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by Charles A. Riley II

When happily lost while traveling, some of my fondest memories come from unplanned encounters with music: a Schubert sonata drifting from an open window in Salzburg; Bach preludes rehearsed in empty churches; Gershwin on a saxophone on the Pont de Neuf in Paris. That joy of being surprised by melody was exactly what it felt like to discover [Adrian Nivola](#)'s musically inspired and thoroughly enchanting sculpture at [The Drawing Room](#) at the end of an afternoon exploring East Hampton galleries.

Nivola's imaginary instruments, such as the swooping *Gaelic Harp*, are delicate wood and metal constructions that silently give the downbeat to set in motion a viewer's inner symphonies. They are a music lover's ideal art, and offer the art lover visual access to musical forms.

Running concurrently at The Drawing Room along with Nivola's sculpture is "Sharon Horvath: Ohio Eye," an appealing exhibition of modestly sized paintings on the lower level of the gallery.

Nivola hand carves and assembles the parts of his fanciful string and wind instruments with the exactitude of a Cremonese luthier. The works are small but seem ready to be tuned and played, shaped by hand and often incorporating scraps scavenged from junk stores and Bushwick construction sites.



“Player from Pompeii” by Adrian Nivola, 2016. Wood, copper, enamel, wire, paper, 23 x 4 x 4 3/4 inches. Courtesy of The Drawing Room.

In *After a Song*, one of the closest parallels to a real instrument in the show, the ebonized finish and gracefully shaped silhouette, the calligraphic elegance of the F holes, the long neck fitted with tuning pegs, and the bridge all testify to Nivola’s fidelity to the instrument maker’s craft. But it is the ironic moment of discord, the intellectual frisson evoked by the dangling, broken strings that lifts this art to a level of resonance that is so admirable.

A riveting example of Nivola’s delicate touch and persistence is a gossamer musical score fashioned from twisted wire called *Eliza’s Sonata*, which improbably floats notes and accidentals on a web of filament that would make a spider proud. I was discouraged from trying to hum a melody from the score because it makes no musical sense, with the notes and symbols selected for visual rather than musical values. I was also told the title was a reference to an ex-girlfriend. “It ended on a sour note,” the artist deadpanned at the opening.



“Adrian Nivola” at The Drawing Room. Courtesy of The Drawing Room. Photo: Jenny Gornam Photography.

The tangle of broken strings is the chaotic climax of *Devil's Trill*, a terrific piece in the show that plays on a famous anecdote from music history. Giuseppe Tartini was a Florentine nobleman and gifted violin virtuoso who dreamed he had made a pact with the devil to play his instrument, and attempted to transcribe the sonata he had heard in his dream when he awoke.

The notoriously difficult piece, an unaccompanied showstopper favored by virtuosi to this day, was originally played by the composer behind a curtain in the chapel of St. Francis in Assisi. Tartini was not just a brilliant player of the violin, but added several design features that made this type of fiercely fast and brilliant playing possible, including a lighter bow and stronger strings. He paved the way for another notorious composer and performer who was also associated with a Faustian bargain, Nicolai Paganini.

All of this came to mind while admiring the way Nivola marries wood and enamel in an elegant and refined body that is utterly antithetical to the dissonance produced by those tangled wires. To complete the inter-disciplinary trifecta of art, music and literature, *Devil's Trill* is reminiscent as well of a quatrain from Percy Bysshe Shelley's monumental sonnet on “Mutability,” in which he compares the inevitability of change and interruption to the jangling strings of a neglected lyre left long untuned:

“Or like forgotten lyres whose dissonant strings
Give various response to each varying blast,
To whose frail frame no second motion brings
One mood or modulation like the last.”

The prelude to this body of work was a visit by the artist to the instruments department of the [Metropolitan Museum](#), where Nivola was especially taken with the exotic string instruments from various cultures. That exotic overtone, an invitation to the folklorist among musical anthropologists, invests the oddly configured strings and supports of *The First Player*. I wondered not just how it would sound, but how one would even play the thing.



“The First Player” by Adrian Nivola, 2016. Wood, Steel, wire, player piano paper, tin, enamel, 3 1/4 x 16 x 3 1/2 inches. Courtesy of The Drawing Room. Photo: Jenny Gorman Photography.

Like many who revere the violin maker’s gifts, Nivola is particularly taken with the scroll that tops the instruments, just as Picasso often lavished on the same motif some of the most elegant curves in his Cubist drawings and paintings. Following the way that Nivola strung his constructions, I thought as well of the wires and strings in the recent show of Picasso’s sculpture at MoMA, reviewed [here](#).



"Minoan Guitar" by Adrian Nivola, 2016. Wood, brass, horse hair, wire, steel, enamel, 6 3/4 x 18 3/8 x 3 1/8 inches. Courtesy of The Drawing Room.

On the lower level of the gallery, an intimate group of ink and pigment paintings by [Sharon Horvath](#) tapped a Tantric wellspring of aesthetic and spiritual inspiration from the artist's Fulbright year in India. The elaborate scrollwork of *Cave Wave*, with its undulating ink forms, reminded me of the ink drawings of Michele Basora.



“Cave Wave” by Sharon Horvath, 2016. Pigment, ink, polymer on paper on canvas. 16 x 16 inches. Courtesy of The Drawing Room. Photo: Jenny Gorman Photography.

Even Horvath’s choice of a support conveys a certain poetry. For the Kandinsky-like painting *Afloat*, she used a fantastic sheet from a ledger, with a Sanskrit inscription rippling along its lower right corner. The mesmerizing patterns and textures in the circular elements are achieved by pressing pure pigment into the cut glass forms of tableware and vases.

With the firm control of intense color in *Bluegreen*, the Cleveland-born Horvath shows the technical bravura she gained at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, where she earned her MFA, and the Cooper Union, where she did her undergraduate work. Her work has been seen in New York since 1989 when she was featured at the Victoria Munroe Gallery in Soho.



'Bluegreen" by Sharon Horvath, 2016. Pigment, ink, polymer on paper on canvas, 12 x 12 inches. Courtesy of The Drawing Room.

My planned list of galleries along Newtown Lane in East Hampton on the fortunate day I saw the Horvath and Nivola shows had not originally included The Drawing Room. From now on, it surely will.

BASIC FACTS: "Adrian Nivola: Sculpture" and "Sharon Horvath: Ohio Eye" are on view July 29 to August 29, 2016 at The Drawing Room, 66H Newtown Lane, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.drawingroom-gallery.com

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