

adoration

Annie Martin

November 10 – December 15, 2018

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des arts visuels et médiatiques

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Ex nihilo nihil fit. Nothing comes from nothing¹, but for Annie Martin the generative act exists at the thresholds of materiality and perception. She lingers in the ephemeral, taking notice of its minutia—the scanning movement of light across a room; the soundscape of a seemingly quiet place. In the tiny fissures between visible and invisible, audible and inaudible, there and not there, Annie Martin finds an abundance of *material* to work with. Years of slow listening, patient looking, and attentive making, have honed her perceptual and sensory acuity, allowing her to make tangible the underlying phenomena embedded in matter and site.

In *adoration*, Martin elaborates on this practice while reflecting on notions of the sacred. Where does sacred experience emerge in a secular, post-religious, or materialist world? Can the particular qualities of the sacred be evoked in secular spaces or profane bodies? These propositions led Martin to Medieval mystic, and abbess, Saint Hildegard von Bingen. From an early age Hildegard is said to have experienced visions, from which she derived a significant opus.² She was enclosed in cloister while still a child, and through divine intervention, became a prolific writer, composer, and leader within her monastic community. Within her body of work is a wealth of sacred chant, which comprises the source material for Annie Martin's multi-channel sounds and painting installation, which was created in collaboration with Janet Youngdahl, a soprano and Hildegard scholar; and with the contribution of Erín Moure, poet and translator.

The acousmatic sound³ in *adoration* heightens the physical relationship between sound and listener. Long vocal tones ring out from one position in the gallery. Then another. Then another. The pauses between are as pregnant as the song. Each sustained vocal note resonates as the singer expels the full capacity of her lungs, evoking the steady cadence of yogic breathing. Extracted from chants by Hildegard and sung by Youngdahl, Martin isolates and distills these tones, using this palette to create prolonged moments of presence. Imagining the space of the gallery infused with, and opened by sound, each tone is distanced from its original context through abstraction, repetition, and layering, creating a meditative space where a visitor may embed narrative or meaning. Martin states, "Of particular interest to me within Hildegard's chant is the extended vocative, 'O', which can be seen as both an opening (an open vowel sustained over an extended phrase) and a salutation."

In considering vocal sounds as immaterial substance within the installation, the ontological status of sound and hearing are brought to attention. Is sound a material? Can sound be a "thing"? What is sound without hearing? The formidable Jean-Luc Nancy asks, "What does it mean to exist according to listening, for it and through it, what part of experience and truth is put into play?"⁴ How miraculous that a sound wave may enter a body, reverberate within the ear, be recognized by a consciousness, and elicit an emotion. Perhaps it is in this stunning congruity that the qualities of sanctity are embedded.

1) A phrase originating in ancient Greek philosophy and attributed to Parmenides, a pre-Socratic philosopher noted for his early contributions to Ontology.

2) Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

3) Hearing sound from beyond a veil or obscured from its original source.

4) Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 5.

The figure of Hildegard forms a rich conceptual tie with Martin's longstanding artistic practice—she can be considered a conduit for the intangible, a body translating and transcribing knowledge from a higher, sacred realm. One Medieval depiction shows Hildegard receiving a vision; tendrils of fiery lava stream down from above dramatically entering her head.⁵ Several colourful paintings line the gallery walls, their abstracted visual planes draw on phrases and themes within Hildegard's oeuvre. One panel echoes the heavy redness of Hildegard's experience of visions. Another gently elucidates Hildegard's notion of *Viriditas: Green-ness*.⁶ The profoundly saturated darkness of another seems to depict vastness, the night sky, or the very essence of unknown—three tears, peer like eyes from behind or above the surface, harkening a split in the fabric of space, time, reality.

Each painting adheres to an essential simplicity, a theme that runs like a seam through Martin's practice; and a notion that also finds purchase throughout spiritual thought. In making these paintings, Martin channels the experiences of Hildegard. There is a stripping away, a gentle austerity that aligns with monastic order, thereby creating a spacious emptiness that allows for slower, deeper contemplation. Mirroring the body in scale and composition, the physicality of each panel punctuates the flowing texture of sound within the gallery. Akin to altars or shrines, they stand in service to the reflective, meditative, or devotional act. Following in an abundant tradition of abstract painting they aim to evoke a higher state of consciousness, yet in *adoration* they also provide a sense of grounding, a place for the body in a space opened and transformed by sound.

*"Nothing but an open mouth, or perhaps an eye, an ear: nothing but an open body.
Bodies are adoration in all their openings."*⁷

Christina Cuthbertson

5) Illumination in *Liber Scivias* c. 1151–1180 from the 20th-century facsimile of the Rupertsberg codex.

6) Associated with vitality, fecundity, lushness, verdure, or growth. Hildegard used it to symbolize spiritual and physical health, often as a reflection of the divine word or as an aspect of divine nature.

7) Jean-Luc Nancy, *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, trans. John McKeane (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 20.