

# TIMEKEEPER TIMEMAKER THE ART OF JULIA FEYRER

by Lee Henderson



Back in 2005, the Vancouver artist Julia Feyrer was keeping time as a drummer for the short-lived but internationally popular rock band They Shoot Horses Don't They? In March of 2012, with her debut solo exhibition of clock-based sculptures and looping 16-mm films, "Alternatives and Opportunities" at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Feyrer stopped time. In the seven years between the rock show and the art show, representations of time became a recurring theme in Feyrer's art. It's a broad subject, and Feyrer's treatment of this theme is also open-ended—she makes sculptures, films, and installations that all deal in different ways with our perception of time. The work she is perhaps best known for is the *Poodle*





1. Julia Feyrer, from left, *Shot*, 2012, *Bird Shot*, laminated glass, chicken feathers, wood, ribbon, metal flashing, plastic clock hands, quartz clock movement, 35.5 diameter x 10 cm; *Dated*, 2012, shotgun slug, laminated glass, desktop calendar, plywood, dartboard, metal clock hands, quartz clock movement, 35.5 diameter x 7 cm. Images courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver.

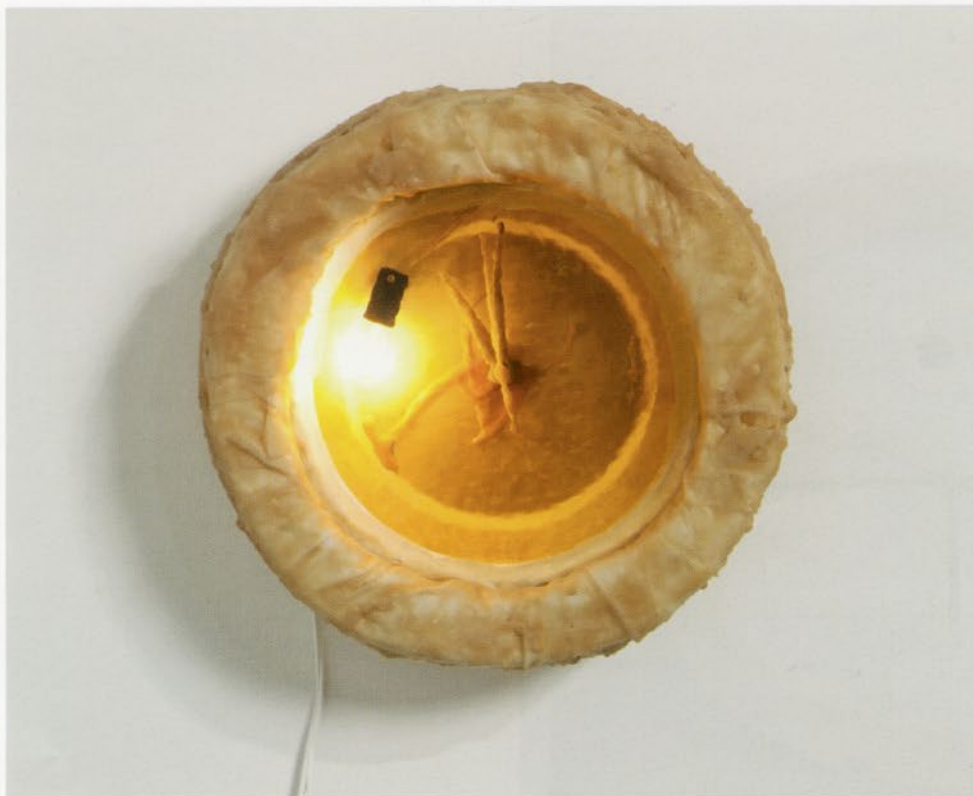
*Dog Ornamental Bar*, 2009, a time travelling speak-easy she constructed in the backyard of a rented house as a working recreation of a local saloon that last served drinks in the 1890s.

We think of time as a system of measurement, but it is almost entirely a construct of memory and imagination. Measure velocities in space with time, measure the regression of time with history; time is both linear and circular, a perplexing fact of consciousness. Despite the apparent empiricism of clocks and calendars, for centuries people have pulled their chins over the question of whether or not time even exists at all, except as a figment of our imaginations. Martin Heidegger said we are time and time is us and is inseparable from our

conscious minds, an illusion of necessity full of deep-seated paradoxes, not all that different from money. Henri Bergson sought to define duration as relative to time, and then Einstein observed that time itself was relative, a fourth dimension. The dimension of memory, hallucination, dream and boredom. And to that end, Julia Feyrer's artwork seems often to ask this fundamental question: Does our socialized notion of time do an accurate job of representing how we experience life?

At the entrance to "Alternatives and Opportunities," Feyrer presented a piece called *Little pitchers have big ears*, 2012—a familiar-looking row of headphones and museum audio-guide clickers, and a bust which was a man's somnolent head. The plaster skull was filled with mugwort, an herb known to promote intense and lucid dreams, even purportedly effective on your consciousness just being in the same room. To enter this dream, you put on the headphones. The audio you would hear was Feyrer's two-channel re-recording of the soundtracks inside the rooms of the Royal BC Museum in Victoria, BC. (The museum's expertly designed audio experiences are intended to amplify





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the sense of verisimilitude for the surrounding wildlife and human history dioramas.) Feyrer's binaural recording imports the nature sounds along with the spatiality of the museum into her own exhibition cube, so that all the echoes of the interior of the museum sound as if they are bouncing off the white space of the gallery. With the headphones on, the sound of sea lions and wild birds and cattle runs and train sounds and Chinatown seem intended for the context of Feyrer's show.

A short 16-mm film, *Artist's Studio*, 2012, relates to daguerreotypes of still lifes the proto-photographer Louis Daguerre arranged in his studio in the 1830s. Feyrer has made her own versions of these objects, the lentil-shaped canteen, Daguerre's stone relief made out of cardboard, lots of foil for curtains. The film shows these items being blown from the left by an electric fan.

Another short film, *Dailies*, 2012, takes as its subject a series of dollar store office clocks the artist has manipulated and distorted, defaced and debilitated, using things like birdshot and chicken feathers, a desktop calendar, fake cobwebs, real mothballs, a tape measure, lampblack, thyme oil, neutral litmus paper and other specifically-chosen oddments with strong associative and sensorial powers. There is one clock that looks as though it had been found embedded in an iceberg, and another



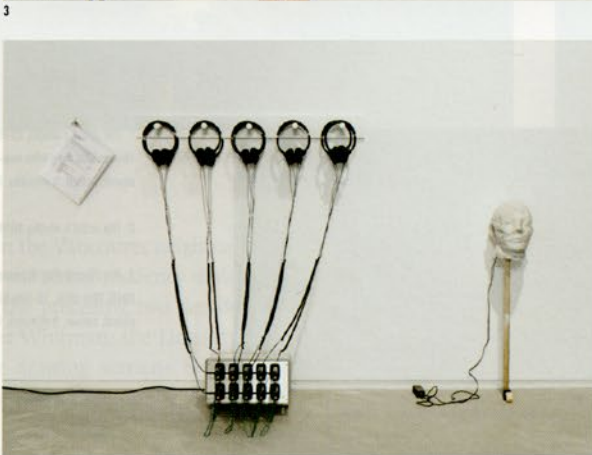
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clock looks as though it were pulled out of a tree, another clock is coated in a thick layer of Aganetha Dyckian beeswax and another makes reference to the pleasures of amateur science (being powered by a jar of home-brewed mead). One clock is treated by iodine crystals and silver leaf and lampblack. The clocks are named things like "Sublimation Clock," "Litmus Clock," "Writer's Block," "Atomizer" and "The Crypt." They still carry some battery juice, but the quartz movement has been scuppered by

1. *Ambered/Muffled (Night Light)*, 2012, English Muffle Noble Brass Glass, beeswaxed cotton, enamel clock body, beeswaxed clock hands, convex glass, night light, Styrofoam, quartz clock movement, 134.25 diameter x 10 cm.

2. *Dailies*, 2012, film still, 16-mm film loop, silent, projection wall, 20 minutes.





3-4. Detail and installation view of *Little Pitchers Have Big Ears*, 2012, plaster head, mugwort, mugwort oil, binaural microphones, silicone ears, cotton, felt, wood, compass, museum audio guides with headphones, Royal BC Museum binaural recording, dimensions variable.

Feyrer's creative intervention—the second hand ticks away in stalled position, unable to move time forward. A kind of dream-time is being asserted here, as these clocks can only measure the subjectivity of the art experience. The clocks represent the private life of time, the immobilized hands visualize the duration of your contemplation, your pause. Each appear in the 16-mm film *Dailies*; in some shots they are shown in conversation, affixed beside each other on a wall, or singly, in choreographed action. In Feyrer's non-narrative film there's an attempt to create a kind of *mise-en-scène* by directing the clocks almost like the individual faces of

actors portraying different characters; different characteristics of time.

This was the second 16-mm film Feyrer produced featuring a cast of assisted readymade clock sculptures. The first film of the series was titled *Irregular Time Signatures* and was included in her 2011 exhibition at Johan Berggren Gallery in Malmö, Sweden. The clocks were given their own non-traditional second-hand tick and a designated number, then filmed individually in a close-up that pulls back each time to reveal a studio set decorated with the number. As the title indicates, the second hand for each of Feyrer's clocks beats to its own irregular time signature, sounding like looped samples of beat breaks, creating a series of short percussion pieces that instantly relate back to Feyrer's own talents as a drummer.

*They Shoot Horses Don't They?* was not a traditional rock 'n' roll band satisfied by a 4/4 time signature. The members were all artist-musicians, the horn section included the painter Eli Bornowsky on trombone. Their sound was somewhere between Animal Collective, Frog Eyes and Goran Bregović, like a raucus clown act barrelling around a circus ring touring Eastern Europe. Feyrer built the kinetic, conniptive rhythms from unconventional beats that stomped bullishly through every song. She also made the cover art. After *They Shoot Horses Don't They?* disbanded (agreeably), Feyrer graduated from Emily Carr and moved to Europe to do her Masters in Fine Arts. Her interest in sound was becoming more abstract as it blended with her art practice. One way she kept in touch with Vancouver was through an ongoing web-based audio zine called *Spoox* she maintains with Pietro Sammarco. *Spoox* anthologizes experimental audio art pieces and atypical prose writing into magazine-length web albums. There are nine issues so far, and dozens of contributors; the most recent offers Julia Feyrer's .txt file "On Erik Lavesson's Irving Blum on Andy Warhol's Soup Can Paintings," a short, absurdist screenplay.

Alongside the theme of time and an ongoing interest in audio experimentation, a consistent format emerges in Feyrer's art projects, her 16-mm films. The jittery, obsolete beauty of her colour films reminds me of a quote by George Steiner in his essay about Samuel Beckett: "It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism, which has made so many homeless, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely."

"Nostalgic" and "deliberately untimely" would make a fine introduction to Feyrer's installations and films. She constructed *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar* in the backyard of 536 East 20th



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made the cover art. After the shooting they  
 They, disband (agreedly), have a good night  
 This is a good night to sleep, but not a good



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1. *The artist's studio*, 2010, film still,  
 16-mm film loop with non-synchronized  
 sound, colour, 5 minutes, 5 seconds.

2. *The artist's studio*, 2010.

3. *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar*,  
 2010, film stills, 16-mm film with optical  
 sound, colour, 9 minutes, 45 seconds.





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Avenue, in the Vancouver neighbourhood of Mount Pleasant. 536 had been the rental residency of dozens of artists, rotating in and out over the preceding two decades, including Donato Mancini and James Whitman; the Lions met at 536 for their weekly collaborative drawing sessions every Tuesday night. And 536 was the site of more than one ambitious conceptual art project in its days and also a great place to party. *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar* was likely the last major installation at the address; the sudden up-spike in real estate finally compelled the owner to sell the house out from under its growing notoriety. In the 1890s, a proprietor operated a saloon with what must have been considered a clever customer-grabbing interior design concept for its time and place—cedar shag. Here is the city's first archivist, JS Matthews's description of the bar in volume five of his eccentric series of first-person accounts of local pioneer life, *Early Vancouver*:

GEORGE CARY. POODLE DOG ORNAMENTAL BAR. The unique Poodle Dog Hotel bar was made of almost every kind of bark, cedar bark, vine maple twigs, moss and fungus, etc., was built by George Cary for Bert Burton. It was a unique bar in appearance. The owner's name was spelt out in big letters of maple branch twigs along the front. The "Poodle Dog" was on Cordova Street between Cambie and Richards streets. It was illuminated with coal gas.

During the summer of 2009, Julia Feyrer's unlicensed *Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar* in 536's backyard opened every evening around dusk. The artist herself served the bar where she offered a home-brewed style of apple wine she learned to make while in Frankfurt as a graduate student at the Städelschule School of Fine Arts. The *Poodle Dog's* made-to-measure interior was also covered in long, poodly cedar bark and vine maple and had moss and lichen hanging from the walls and the ceiling to match the shaggy look of the original, based on the one known photograph of the bar's layout. With seating and décor sculptures made by Ron Tran, Collin Johanson and other artists, that summer of its operation the *Poodle Dog* hosted evenings of literary readings, live music, lectures, performances and film screenings. Footage from these nights went into the film that premiered later in 2010 at Artspeak Gallery in Vancouver. Like all her other films, the aesthetics of anachronism, including the grainy film-reel fidelity, plays a subtle role in suspending the viewer's trust in the linearity of time, as happens when you find historical drama full of inaccuracies.

In Vancouver, Feyrer's work fits into a supportive mingling of like-minds. Within her generation, there's a handful of artists who share a conceptual studio practice that aims, in the creative process, for a minimal environmental and economical footprint.





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In the short term, this means an art of found objects, discarded thrift assemblages, assisted readymades and installations multipurposed to include community and audience interaction. Sensitive to the outsider status of garbage and refuse, Feyrer and colleagues scavenge flea markets and back lanes for their supplies, produce their own homemade craftworks from this stuff, build antiquated or amateur technologies like radios and clocks for spatially-sensitive installations, snub bylaws and set up relational performance parties, and all with a no-frills sense of humour. Kara Uzelman is known for having conducted an archeological dig in her rented backyard to find bottles and spoons and whatnot, or going to a yard sale, buying everything, then living with the goods in the gallery. Gareth Moore and Jacob Gleeson opened an infamous, quasi-general store called St. George Marsh on a corner in Mount Pleasant that sold all things eccentric and hardly anything practical, aside from kids' candy. Since they closed down, Gleeson opened the Tentshop, an online trading post, and Gareth Moore started to make strange ramshackle sculptures and films based on his long poetic walks. Many of these artists studied under, or were inspired by, the lively, anarchistic and hands-on practice of Vancouver artist Geoffrey Farmer, who guest-lectured at Emily Carr University and often stages

installations that metamorphosize over the course of an exhibition and rely entirely on found materials. Feyrer's *Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar* took us through the summer of '09, and then, just in time, thanks to the 2010 Winter Olympics, the city was flush with conceptual speakeasies: Among the best were Farmer's open space he called Every Letter in the Alphabet, with a focus on processual and text-based art; the artist collective Instant Coffee's Ultraviolet Light Bar in Gastown was booking live dance acts; and Theo Sim's Candahar Bar made a brief appearance on Granville Island tapping slow Guinneses for the atypical lecture scene. All the venues shared a very civilized, anti-draconian set of values, and each room was full of clues as to its set of intentions for an immersive, social environment.

Feyrer's work relates to and anticipates these conceptual saloons. In making art about time, I should think it is not about just keeping pace, but predicting a kind of future, being in the moment and questioning the present, while referencing shared memories drummed up from the deep wells of the personal creative dream. No doubt, Feyrer's timing is right on. ■

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1–2. *Aula*, 2009, film stills, 16-mm film transferred to video, colour, 3 minutes, 40 seconds.

3–4. *Untitled Sicily Film* (collaboration with Pietro Sammarco), 2008, film still, 16-mm film transferred to video, colour, 8 minutes, 35 seconds.