

The Dallas Morning News

It was a DMA curator's kids who inspired the museum's latest show, 'Speechless'

In a major new project, Sarah Schleuning, who championed the Dallas Museum of Art's blockbuster Dior retrospective, brings together artists who play with our senses.

By: Dan Singer
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People listen to sounds emitted by a piece by Yuri Suzuki called "Sound of the Earth Chapter 2" at "Speechless: Different by Design." (Vernon Bryant / Staff Photographer)

Sarah Schleuning's 6-year-old son, Vaughn, has an expressive language disorder, and "for a long time really didn't speak much," she says. Schleuning became the Margot B. Perot Senior Curator of Decorative Arts and Design at the Dallas Museum of Art last spring. "I work in the visual, cultural world. I'm a hyper-verbal person. And I had a child who wasn't really able to form words," she says.

Vaughn's sister Zuzu, 10, approached his disorder in a way that only a child could. She listened to him without judgment — she'd never known any other way — and at times, translated his vocalizations into clear language that Schleuning and her husband could understand.

CRISTINA GRAJALES GALLERY

“It just really felt like: What a magical thing to watch. You know, the both of them, as they navigate this,” she says. There was no preordained syntax for what they were doing and, still, it often worked.



Sarah Schleuning talks about the art installation “Speechless: Different by Design” at the Dallas Museum of Art on Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2019. (Vernon Bryant / Staff Photographer)

Schleuning, who organized the DMA’s recent blockbuster Dior retrospective, became fascinated by the in-between ways that meaning is negotiated between those who perceive the world differently. And by the role she might play in the process. “I’m trying to understand how to communicate — in a world where I’m the stranger,” she says.

Despite the degree to which spoken language fell short as a way to communicate with her son, she had a few other tools in her toolbox. She was drawn to the Picture Exchange Communication System, a framework that relies on sight and visual symbols, instead of speech, as a mode of language. The parallels to her professional life were right there. “I thought, we work at museums, we are in the land of images,” she says.

In 2014 she pitched her idea for an exhibit informed by these thoughts to her colleagues at the High Museum in Atlanta, where she was then working as a curator. By the time she arrived at the DMA in 2018, her research for a show on alternate uses of the senses was already years in the making. Early last September, she held a kind of brainstorming session — which received a weighty name, “the Convening” — where she brought artists into the DMA along with a group of scientists from the University of Texas at Dallas’ Center for BrainHealth, the Callier Center for Communication Disorders, Texas Woman’s University and other institutions to swap ideas for two days. “And it was sort of understanding: What would this be? Could it be something?” she says.

The show that has resulted, “Speechless: Different by Design,” features six installations by seven artists, all of whom attended the initial get-together. They come from New York, Nevada, Switzerland and elsewhere. It opens Nov. 10 and runs through March 22 before heading off to Schleuning’s old digs at the High Museum, which is co-presenting the exhibition.

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Jimmie Henslee listens to the sounds emitted by a piece by Yuri Suzuki called “Sound of the Earth Chapter 2,” at “Speechless: Different by Design.”(Vernon Bryant / Staff Photographer)

Inside the exhibition hall at the DMA, a central foyer greets visitors with some ground rules: “Be curious, be thoughtful, be gentle.” (Translation: Yes, you can touch — just go easy, OK?) Braille booklets with information about the show are available near the entrance. The space is laid out choose-your-own-adventure style. Artists who contributed to the show have their own rooms to the left and right.

Yuri Suzuki’s is the darkest of all, and that’s on purpose. Inside a quiet and entirely black space rests a large black sphere. When you put your ear to the object, you hear sounds of different kinds: a river, a TV, a shopping mall, birds chirping, people arguing. Suzuki sourced each individual audio clip — there are around 60 right now — through an online portal. Then he fed them into the globe to play at the same locations from which they were submitted. The piece is called Sound of the Earth Chapter 2. Suzuki plans to add more sounds as they continue to come in through the website.

His intention was to get at themes of globalism without relying on visuals, the media most commonly used to reference the concept of the



“Theoracle,” by Ini Archibong is pictured on Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2019 at the Dallas Museum of Art where it’s included in the exhibition “Speechless: Different by Design.”(Vernon Bryant / Staff Photographer)

world, writ-large. Suzuki is dyslexic and audio, he says, helps him better grasp the idea of our planet. “It’s more about focus on the sound itself and the vibration,” he says.

Across the hall, Ini Archibong’s Theoracle has gone in an entirely different direction. In a bare, white room, a large elliptical obelisk glows in the center. It’s surrounded by a number of brass pedestals, arranged in a ring. Mounted on each one is an oblong glass sphere with light bulbs inside. On their own, the objects are stationary, but they swivel when visitors push them. As they turn, the bulbs inside them brighten or dim and organ-like

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Artist Ini Archibong (center) explains how his piece called “theoracle” works to Jackson (left, who goes by one name) during a preview event for “Speechless: Different by Design” on Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2019. (Vernon Bryant / Staff Photographer)

tones piped into the room through overhead speakers ascend or descend in pitch.

All of the materials for the objects were handmade across Europe, says Archibong, who lives in Switzerland. He sees working with craftsmen as an essential part of his art. “There’s a certain thing that happens when you transmit an idea from one soul to the next soul,” he says. It’s a kind of passing-on that, he says, “needs to be maintained.”

Closer to the room’s entrance is a large, speaker like contraption that sits face-up on the floor, broadcasting a continuous bass-level hum. A thin pool of water covers its surface, and as the light catches it from above, certain areas of the water appear brighter than others, forming patterns. “What happens is there are certain frequencies that when reached they create patterns in nature — this is anywhere. And it’s happening all the time but it’s most visible with certain frequencies in water,” says Archibong.

The overall experience of Archibong’s piece is a synesthetic frenzy. As the lights dim or brighten and the sounds warp, everything blends into one.

When you walk out of Archibong’s room, you can still hear its sounds throughout other portions of the gallery, on your way to Steven and William Ladd’s Scroll Space, a showcase of the textile scrolls they guide community members in making through their engagement programs. Or maybe you’re tuning into Matt Checkowski’s Glyph, or heading over to see Misha Kahn’s contribution, a collection of cocoon-like inflating structures powered by an internal vacuum system built into the floor of the gallery.



Jim Henslee listens to the sounds emitted by a piece by Yuri Suzuki called “Sound of the Earth Chapter 2,” at “Speechless: Different by Design.” (Vernon Bryant / Staff Photographer)

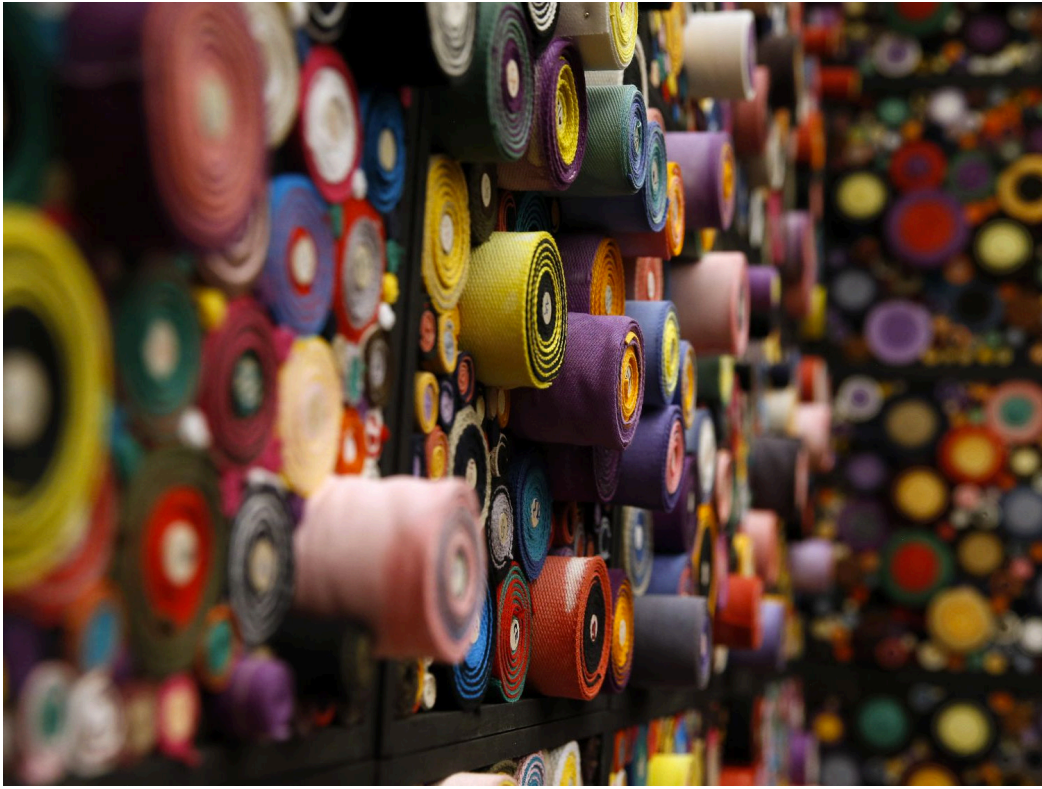


The artists William Ladd (left) and Steven Ladd (right) stand inside their work “Scroll Space” at “Speechless: Different by Design” at the Dallas Museum of Art on Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2019. (Vernon Bryant / Staff Photographer)

The parallels between “Speechless,” with its focus on putting visitors near beautiful objects, and the new breed of prop-laden Instagram “experience” galleries opening in Dallas is undeniable. The difference is that in the age of these pop-up entertainment venues, whose only function is to provide a backdrop for the self-indulgent vanity shot, the DMA show aims to do precisely the opposite: arouse empathy.

Another room off the central foyer provides what Schleuning has dubbed a “de-escalation space.” Furnished with rocking chairs, weighted blankets and noise-reducing headphones, it’s supposed to be a place where visitors can decompress. It was designed with the input of experts.

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“Scroll Space” by Steven and William Ladd is pictured on Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2019 at the Dallas Museum of Art where it’s included in the exhibition “Speechless: Different by Design.”(Vernon Bryant / Staff Photographer)

A long wall that fronts the room is stark white — not the coziest color scheme. So in order to soften things, the team has arranged each page of the show’s companion book, designed by Laurie Haycock Makela and set to be published in January, across the wall. It’s a window into the process by which the show came about.

When asked what about the process was most surprising to her, Schleuning responded: “I think that it worked.” Although expert knowledge is often the prerequisite for good curation, this show came about from something else — a curator who felt way out of her depth.

Details

“Speechless: Different by Design” runs Nov. 10 to March 22 at the Dallas Museum of Art, 1717 N. Harwood St. \$16 tickets with discounts available for seniors, students, and military. DMA members and children 11 and under are free. dma.org/speechless