

Art

Oliver Beer and His “Cat Orchestra” Create Cosmic Paintings

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Portrait of Oliver Beer performing in “Resonance Paintings – Cat Orchestra” at Almine Rech, 2024. Photo by Thomas Barratt. Courtesy of Almine Rech.

Resonance Painting (Ride the Dragon) (2024), the largest painting in the show, resembles a nebula beneath a grid pattern. This piece is made by a confluence of two notes: one low note that creates the dense blue blob and a high note that gives it a finer definition. Beer likened these geometric patterns to an “acoustic Agnes Martin.” He’s also used this technique to respond to other historical artists: For a forthcoming project, a commission for Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris, Beer will respond to Claude Monet’s water lilies, mirroring the Impressionist’s undulating pond with more of his “Resonance Paintings.”

Like the scientists Beer is fascinated by, the artist is always searching for what's possible through his art, finding new ways of expressing himself through sound and visuals, engaging both senses in an ongoing dialogue. Today, he finds the music in everything, offering his audience a gateway to a cross-sensory experience. "It's not just these paintings; it's every painting in the world [that's] got a musical note, as does every vessel," Beer said. ■

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Oliver Beer, installation view of "Resonance Paintings - Cat Orchestra" at Almine Rech in Tribeca, 2024. Photo by Thomas Barratt. Courtesy of Almine Rech.

Later, Beer began trying to visualize these sounds in 2020, embarking on his "Resonance Paintings" series. For these, he placed the canvas horizontally and put a speaker underneath, where he plays the notes from his cat vessels. The sound from these vessels vibrates the canvas, manipulating the ultra-fine pigment he gently deposits on top of it. Inspired by scientists like 17th-century physicist Robert Hooke, Beer has learned to play the cat vessels to achieve his intended visual result.

"Over the years, I've refined this process," Beer said. "It's not a science experiment where you show the movement of sound...but actually using the sound as a paintbrush to paint what I want to paint, not just what the sound may randomly create."

His latest "Resonance Paintings" evoke the cosmos, showing blue and white ripples without any visible gestural movements. This is because these paintings move and settle simultaneously as Beer manipulates the volume of the speaker underneath the canvas. Once he places the ultra-fine pigment on the canvas, Beer never directly guides them with his hand. Instead, he uses the speaker and his vessels to control the vibrations and shift the paint on the canvas before it stains the canvas. For Beer, it is "a controlled geometry." Though he initially worked in charcoal, Beer found inspiration in the blue and white porcelain ceramics he saw in Seoul, helping to convey new gradients and nuances.



Portrait of Oliver Beer, 2022. © Oliver Beer. Photo by Jason Alden. Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech.

In 1650, occult philosopher Athanasius Kircher conceived an instrument as peculiar as it was provocative: the *Katzenklavier* (or cat organ), where live cats, arranged by the pitch of their voices, would cry out in distress when the instrument's keys struck their tails. This cruel instrument was first detailed by Kircher in his book *Musurgia Universalis* and later visualized in the 1883 French textbook *La Nature*, where seven cats in cages serve as the pipes for a piano.

The image of *Katzenklavier* in *La Nature*, on display near the entrance of Almine Rech in Tribeca, is the entry point to British artist Oliver Beer's solo exhibition "Resonance Paintings — Cat Orchestra." For the show, Beer (humanely) realized Kircher's musical vision with his 2024 installation *Cat Orchestra*. Here, 37 hollow, cat-shaped vessels are transformed into a singular harmonious instrument. Each vessel, placed meticulously on a plinth and arranged similarly to a symphony orchestra, is connected to a keyboard via a highly sensitive microphone. This functions like a switchboard, activating the microphones to capture the nuanced sounds resonating within the vessels.



Oliver Beer, installation view of "Resonance Paintings – Cat Orchestra" at Almine Rech in Tribeca, 2024. Photo by Thomas Barratt. Courtesy of Almine Rech.

"The microphone turns on, and it feeds back at the exact note of that object," Beer told Artsy while playing his *Cat Orchestra*. To achieve this harmony, Beer meticulously sourced a collection of cat vessels, each with a distinct timbre, enlisting friends, family, and colleagues on a global hunt. An absinthe pitcher, crafted to depict a cat playing the mandolin, resonates with an F sharp, while the Japanese *maneki-neko* figurine at the front of the orchestra emits a cheerful D note. "The fact that they are also singing feels so natural," he added.

Cat Orchestra, pre-programmed to play various tunes, bathes the gallery space in ambient music, creating an immersive soundscape for visitors. Beyond the pre-set melodies, Beer's exhibition also extends an open invitation to visitors. Until the exhibition closes on April 27th, guests can engage with the artwork by sitting at the keyboard to play music with the cat vessels.



Oliver Beer
Resonance Painting (ride the dragon), 2024
Almine Rech
Price on request



Oliver Beer
Resonance Painting (Make Out in My Car), 2024
Almine Rech
Price on request

Beer first developed his love for sound and music as a child. “I was always making drawings and visual art, but also had this uncanny sensitivity to harmony—I could hear what key the tunnels of the Tube in London were in, or I could hear a glass change key as you fill it up from a wine bottle,” Beer said. Before studying visual art at the University of Oxford, he focused on music composition at the Academy of Contemporary Music in London. Then, in 2015, the Metropolitan Museum of Art commissioned the then-30-year-old artist to create an instrument from the museum’s collection—converging these two mediums. Here, he organized his first *Vessel Orchestra* (2019), finding 32 vessels to play in harmony.

“When you hear these things resonating, what’s happening is that there is a note that fits inside that vessel physically,” Beer said. “You throw a stone in a pond, and you see perfect concentric circles. Sound is really similar; if you could see the air around the vessel as it resonates, you would see amazing geometry resonating and coming out. It’s just that we hear that geometry rather than seeing it.”