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INTERNAL Synchronicity

Juan Fontanive's Project Atrium installation is a colorful dance of temporal relations



PHOTO BY MADISON GROSS

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Brooklyn-based artist Juan Fontanive has always been handy. When he was a child growing up in Cleveland, Fontanive's parents were career artists (his mother Jacqueline is a portrait and mural artist, his father Juan an abstract painter) who filled the family's home with old objects, some of them mechanized.

"Stuff would break and we just had to fix it ourselves," Fontanive says of those early days. "I got comfortable with my hands, and I gained a lot of confidence that I could figure out something complex once I took it apart."

That confidence, along with Fontanive's keen eye for design, is on display in a new Project Atrium installation, *Movement 4*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville. Descending from the ceiling—roughly 40 feet above the ground floor—Fontanive's assemblage of pulleys, springs, timing belts, gears and rotating rods made from hundreds of feet of steel, performs an alluring, colorful dance of synchronicity. The piece can give the viewer the feel of taking in a bird's-eye view of a bustling New York City street corner—a harmonious intersection of order and chaos—as every few seconds, dozens of colored disks flip and chime.

The multilevel kinetic installation is Fontanive's largest to date and it's his first solo exhibition in a major museum.

"We hope viewers will be mystified by its complex systems," said MOCAJax Curator Jaime DeSimone. "Fontanive's practice—part sculptural and part mechanical—expands the lineage of the Project Atrium series. [It's] the first time a kinetic sculpture [has been] featured in the cavernous Atrium Gallery."

Fontanive cultivated a keen eye for design and mechanizations while studying at the Royal College of Art, London. The constant bustle and commotion there, as well as the city's eclectic vintage markets, proved to be deep wells of inspiration. Fontanive had been working with moving images, rigging flipbooks with hundreds of pages of images on continuous loops.

"I would go to the markets on the East End, and collect a lot of old things and found objects for my sculptures," he said. "I would buy old clocks for a pound. Many of them were at least 100 years old. I talked a lot to clockmakers and craftsmen and I began taking [the clocks] apart, putting them back together and using them in my work. That was a big influence, just to see how things were made."

While Fontanive's ingenuity is ever-present in his artwork, there is whimsical urbanity to both his sculpture work and kinetic art installations. Now a resident of New York City, Fontanive says he's witnessed his share of urban processions.

"The city in general is a big influence on my work," he said. "Both in New York and London, going through the streets, just seeing things moving, looking into shop windows and seeing people setting things up, there's so much movement."

And though Fontanive draws inspiration and stimulation from the complexity of urban activity, he's similarly inspired by the temporal relationships he's witnessed in the natural world.

"I have a Vespa that I drive in Manhattan. Often it feels like you're part of a school of fish," he said. "You get into this flow of everything moving around you and become more instinctual with how you drive. There definitely seems to be an internal synchronicity to both cities and nature."

Fontanive's *Movement 4* began with a MOCAJax site visit, when the vast scale of the installation became evident.

"The scale of the space was something I thought a lot about. It's very vertical," he said. "It's so high, 40 feet or something. Sometimes the work needs to find its right size and I think in that room it did."

Scaling *Movement 4* was just one piece of a complex puzzle, however, as Fontanive, over the course of the two-week installation, affixed dozens of pulleys to nearly 300 timing belts, all controlled by a high-torque motor. To avoid friction within the machinations, Fontanive has the pulleys moving across bearings.

The resulting installation—a rich tapestry of colored disks attached to twirling rods and marching belts—executes its choreography in virtual silence, save for a regular chiming, as the disks flip, 180 degrees, from colored to white.

"I used a mechanical stop so that when the disks flip, they don't bounce, but instead stop nearly outright," Fontanive said of his installation's most striking element. "It doesn't stop it perfectly, but it slows it down. That creates the sound that resonates off the disk and the rod in between. They're stainless steel, so it makes a specific sound."

One would imagine such an intricately designed piece, with multiplex movements and materials, requires a great deal of preparation. But Juan Fontanive's creative process is somewhat analogous to his work. Like a pedestrian approaching a succession of Manhattan intersections, Fontanive knows that such apparent synchronicity requires a fair amount of improvisation.

"I leave a lot of my process to trial-and-error," he said. "Working with the materials, trying different mechanisms, my goal is just to make things *work* with each other."