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AROUND THE GALLERIES

Unfathomable acts evoke a sense of awe

By Holly Myers, Special to The Times



Spidery forms stretch from the ceiling like frozen lightning bolts in Emilie Halpern's solo show at Anna Helwing. (Joshua White)

Themes of light and electricity

Intelligently conceived, rigorously refined and elegantly fabricated, **Emilie Halpern's** second solo show at Anna Helwing Gallery is a pleasure to encounter. At a time when so many seem to be evoking the banner of Conceptualism simply as a way around having to work very hard, the conscientiousness of Halpern's approach — the thoroughness and care with which she treats idea and object — distinguishes her as one of L.A.'s most promising young artists.

Titled "White Nights," the show is a bundle of tenderly cultivated conceptual threads all relating in some way to electricity and light.

At the center of the installation are several large, delicate, spidery forms stretching down from the ceiling like frozen bolts of lightning. (They're made from thermoplastic-coated wire.) Nearby is an audio piece that projects the sound of a human heartbeat gradually accelerated, as if by electricity, to the speed of a hummingbird's heartbeat; then a Polaroid of a man with a lightning-like pattern drawn across his back, simulating a condition known as "lightning flowers" that develops temporarily on the skin in the immediate aftermath of being struck; then a photograph of a desert flower that blooms only once a year, and only at night, dying with the light of dawn — or, presumably, with the flash required to take the picture.

Though formally elegant, the work hearkens to memories of elementary school science fairs, to a time of ant farms and baking-soda volcanoes, when science seemed not so far removed from magic. Halpern's methods are pointedly low tech and she always reveals them, adding notes to the checklist describing her intentions and explaining the relevant scientific information.

From within this collection of natural phenomena, deeper themes begin to emerge, revolving around the interplay of light and darkness, life and death, the body and its absence. The resounding through line is fascination, and Halpern shares her own generously.