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AROUND THE GALLERIES

Beauty resides there, in the void

By Holly Myers, Special to The Times
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Mungo Thomson is adept at the clean, clever conceptual gesture: a series of car antenna ornaments evoking the head of John Baldessari; a video streaming landscape backdrops from Looney Tunes Road Runner cartoons; a series of ambient recordings made in one gallery and replayed in another. The economy of such an approach is admirable but delicate.

At best, the works strike a clear, incisive, even poetic chord. (The Road Runner piece was especially enchanting.) At worst, they risk coming across as insubstantial or flippant.

In "Negative Space (STSci-PRC2003-24)," a large photo-mural installed in the [Hammer Museum's](#) stairwell space, Thomson settles on a fruitful balance between conceptual economy and visual presence. As in many earlier works, the key dynamic is inversion: Imagery of a distant galaxy, taken by the Hubble telescope, has been flipped from dark to light, so that the blackness of outer space becomes the whiteness of the museum wall. (The series, according to the artist, "came out of reflecting on the color of nothing; in outer space the void is black, and in the art context the void -- the empty gallery -- is always white.") Philosophically intriguing, the mural is also quite beautiful.

An accompanying sound installation extends such interplay into the aural realm, with a similar current of New Age mysticism. On the top floor, the artist has installed a recording of whale songs, sped up by a factor of 16 so as to resemble the chirping of birds, while on the ground floor, a recording of bird sounds has been decelerated by the same factor to approximate whales. It is a rigorous process, this conceptual whittling down, and it finds an appropriate scale in this illuminating installation.

Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, (310) 443-7000, through Dec. 4. Closed Mondays. www.hammer.ucla.edu