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Robe helps DesignSpace Capture A Moment in Imagination

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The entertainment technical and production industry has risen to the pandemic challenge with so many prescient and imaginative responses of how to present art, entertainment and stimulate emotional engagement during a time of separation and isolation. None was more innovative than DesignSpace, the brainchild of John Featherstone of US-based design collective Lightswitch.

DesignSpace was an immersive, spectacular, and thoroughly fun drive-through visual extravaganza of light and video art ... presented and curated in close collaboration with John's contacts at Arizona State University (ASU), and utilizing over 160 Robe lighting fixtures, among others.

Working in conjunction with Jake Pinholster, associate dean of ASU's Herberger Institute for Design & The Arts, plus several student artists, designers, and technicians plus his own team at Lightswitch, John's concept transformed four levels of concrete functionality within ASU's main parking garage into a vibrant gallery backdrop for 30 unique pieces of visual art.

These were enjoyed across 12 evenings of shows over a three-week period by approximately 30,000 people in 4,000 vehicles.

To illuminate this vast pop-up gallery space - both for safe driving and aesthetic reinforcement - John chose four types of Robe luminaires - 78 x Spiider wash beams, 58 x MegaPointes, 14 x ESPRITES and 12 x ColorStrobes. These were part of approximately 800 lights, plus LED screens, media servers, projectors and other lighting, video, and audio kit.

Close to 10 trucks of gear in total rocked up at ASU! Lighting was supplied by rental specialists Video West with a team led by Donny LoDico and ILC (Intelligent Light Creations), with video and audio also delivered by Video West.

The idea of creating an immersive drive-through light art experience dawned on John as he was thinking about the many final year students on design, production and technical courses who will graduate this year - without having had the usual opportunities of working on major practical projects.

That, coupled with the vast amount of valuable lighting, sound and video equipment that has been lying idle while shows have been on hold, together with the many industry professionals keen and anxious to move forward and beyond this pandemic scenario.

"The bottom line is that it's really important to nurture our future industry practitioners during the tough times as well as the good times," John declared.

He chatted to Donny and Jack Waitkus at Video West along with Scott Falbe and Joby Benoit at ILC who all embraced the idea, and then started casing various sites.

The four-story currently under-used parking lot at ASU – which John knows via his daughter's studies and his work as a guest lecturer – seemed perfect to stage a found-space art exhibition. With Jake backing the project from the off, work started on the logistics, together with technical production students and a range of John's industry contacts who were energized to get involved.

Once the site was decided, students at Herberger Institute – who study a full range of creative disciplines encompassing architecture, digital culture, film making, music, theatre, design, production and many more – answered an open call to artists, which was also widened to include works proposed by some guest artists plus the Lightswitch crew who have substantial experience in this area.

The student artists were given a budget to work with and create their installations, while the design and production students worked alongside the Video West and Lightswitch crews to realize each of them.

"It was a hugely collaborative venture and a great community event which is what made it so special," declared John relating this completely uplifting project.

Once the designed artworks with their plans for realization were submitted and selected, Lightswitch plotted out a route approximately a mile long embracing all four levels of the car park.

The larger video and projection pieces were located on the top floor and the diversity of smaller projects – from glitter balls to forests of LED tubes – were all accommodated on the lower floors, with a coherent 'lighting narrative' linking all of them together.

That is where the Robe fixtures came in!

They were "the connective tissue" that glued everything together he stated, adding that was critical to the overall aesthetic of this exhibition that there were no perceptive edges, so these Robe luminaires played a fundamental role.

The different Robe lights were placed on all four levels on an assortment of stands, with many on the floor dramatically striping the drive-path for the vehicles and lighting the backgrounds to some of the art.

John has used Robe for several years on different Lightswitch projects and it is a "preferred" brand for the company when available, as well a go-to rental item at Video West.

With this exhibition, John needed the excellent wash and color capabilities of the Spiiders and the versatility and dynamics of the MegaPointes to be the event workhorses providing "recognizable visual vocabularies" within the environment.

"A major objective was that I didn't want anyone to feel 'stuck' or to go into complete darkness whilst journeying through the route ... it was important for the environment to be fluid and harmonious and that's why its lighting was key," explained John.

All lighting was running on an MA network, programmed by Dennis Connors, Chris Merriman and Hailey Featherstone. John's daughter Hailey majored in Technical Theatre at ASU with a focus on Lighting Design, graduating five years ago to become a lighting professional. Since then, she's worked for Beyoncé, Paul McCartney, Taylor Swift and Eddie Izzard amongst others.

"ALL the student design pieces were amazing," emphasizes John, adding that the work by HYBYCOZO (Hyperspace Bypass Construction Zone) - a series of large-scale installations that investigate geometric exploration through light, shadow, and perception - was outstanding.

As was Anastacia Meconiates' designed, created and curated "Boötes Constellation Sonification", an artwork inspired by the Boötes (a.k.a. Herdsman) constellation. Visible in the night sky over the southwestern U.S., this image is prevalent in Native American art. "My dear friend Paula Dinkel, a fantastic and legendary lighting designer for major theme parks worldwide like Shanghai Disneyland and MOTIONGATE in Dubai mentored Anastasia, with suggestions on how to expand, broaden and facilitate her creation."

He also loved a tunnel experience designed by Matt Soson on the garage roof. Matt was also a graduate student at ASU, and in this section, guest vehicles were turned into virtual stardust!

Entering a tunnel of LED walls, a camera captured the vehicle as it cruised along and merged into the stars, meandering its way through the constellations surrounding it. "The immersion reinforced the idea that we are all made from stardust, and it was truly mesmerizing," observed John, clearly delighted at the invention, originality and enjoyment generated by the event.

Apart from being a big success with the public and giving the Herberger Institute students valuable experience and the chance to get out, get technical and get creative, DesignSpace really illustrated the importance of light in people's lives and how it can unite and be a powerful symbol of hope.

With Covid fatigue clearly setting in after a year of the pandemic, "it was incredible to offer this hands-on opportunity and produce an event and a learning experience owned by everyone involved," stated John. With a completely can-do mentality and no complex hierarchies, "we all just got on and did it rock 'n' roll style," he concluded.

DesignSpace is a great testament to the resilience, resourcefulness, and imagination of our industry as a whole as well as some of our rising stars.

Photo Credit: Micah Rind





