

BY JASON SPENCER

A group of Canadian artists have reinvented the wheel — well, in a manner of speaking. As part of the Koffler Centre for the Arts' latest off-site exhibit, Spin Off, a group of contemporary multimedia artists has created reinterpretations of the ancient Hindu and Buddhist symbol of the *mandala*, a Sanskrit word for "circle."

Given their opposing nature, using technology to portray spirituality may be a contentious ritual to some, but Canadian artist Melissa Shiff says she's compelled by the ambiguous territory her work treads upon.

"What drives me ... is my fascination with the intersection of the sacred and the profane," says Shiff, who will be displaying her Jewish Animated Mandala Series (JAMS) at the Toronto exhibit until Dec. 4. "I'm breathing new life into these ritual objects ... they've lost their original function."

JAMS, which was originally commissioned under the name "Off the Wall" by the Jewish Museum of New York in 2008, features a projection of digital photographs of such Judaic artifacts as menorahs, Torah mantles and sedaka boxes, which are rendered unrecognizable and then synced to rave music.

Since a Tibetan mandala is a quadrant of four circles, Shiff says, her Judaic interpretation is a hybrid that takes the form of the Star of David, which is six-pointed. The end result is meant to induce a trance-like state, which will transport viewers to a higher state of consciousness, though Shiff says she's aware that "one person's religious experience is another person's aesthetic experience."

Shiff, who is an associate professor of art at the University of Toronto, says the multifaceted purposes of the spiritual device were well-received at the Jewish Museum because it made the exhibit accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds.

"[A] transcendental state is akin to what happens at a rave dance party: you lose yourself and you're seeking ecstasy," she says, adding, "ecstasy is the drug, but it's also a metaphor of transcendence."

The need for one to escape the incessant noise and distraction of modern life also prompted Edmonton audio/visual artist Gary James Joynes to create his exhibit piece, *Frequency Painting: Ouroboros*. "Ouroboros is a space of self-reflection and a space to slow down in this fast paced world — a meditative object," Joynes says. "We're losing our ability to do that."

The series was created by employing what Joynes calls "frequency painting": Sand is placed on a modified metal plate that is attached to a speaker assembly, and then tones are played by Joynes using an analog sine-wave generator, at a specific resonance. The vibrations then sculpt the sand into intricate patterns. "Specific frequencies come up and draw themselves," he says.

This visualization of sound is known as cymatics, says Joynes, who spent the past two years studying this phenomenon, beginning with a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts at the New Media Institute.

"My live cinema work has been all about creating connections between sound and visuals, so when I discovered cymatic sound, I was very excited because they're one and the same," he says.

Separate from the Ouroboros, but still part of the Koffler exhibit, Joynes' live cinema work *On the Other Side ...* will be performed at the Toronto Underground Cinema on Sept. 25. The work, originally commissioned by the 2008 International Leonard Cohen Festival, looks at the emotional depth of Cohen's catalogue, with an audio-visual twist.

Both Shiff and Joynes agree that technology can be used as a vessel to attain a spiritual experience, but what that realm is mirrors the perpetual motif of Spin Off. "To me, it's all about the source material," Joynes says.

"I'm much more in the aesthetic camp" Shiff says. "[It] depends on the subject."

■ Spin Off: Contemporary Art Circling the Mandala opened Sept. 22 and runs until Dec. 4 at the Koffler Centre for the Arts' off-site gallery at 80 Spadina Ave. in Toronto. For more information, visit kofflerarts.org.

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Edmonton artist Gary James Joynes creates mandalas through a process he calls "frequency painting."

COURTESY THE ARTIST

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