

Sight and Sound: The Music and Kinetic Sculpture of Dale McKinney

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Abstract

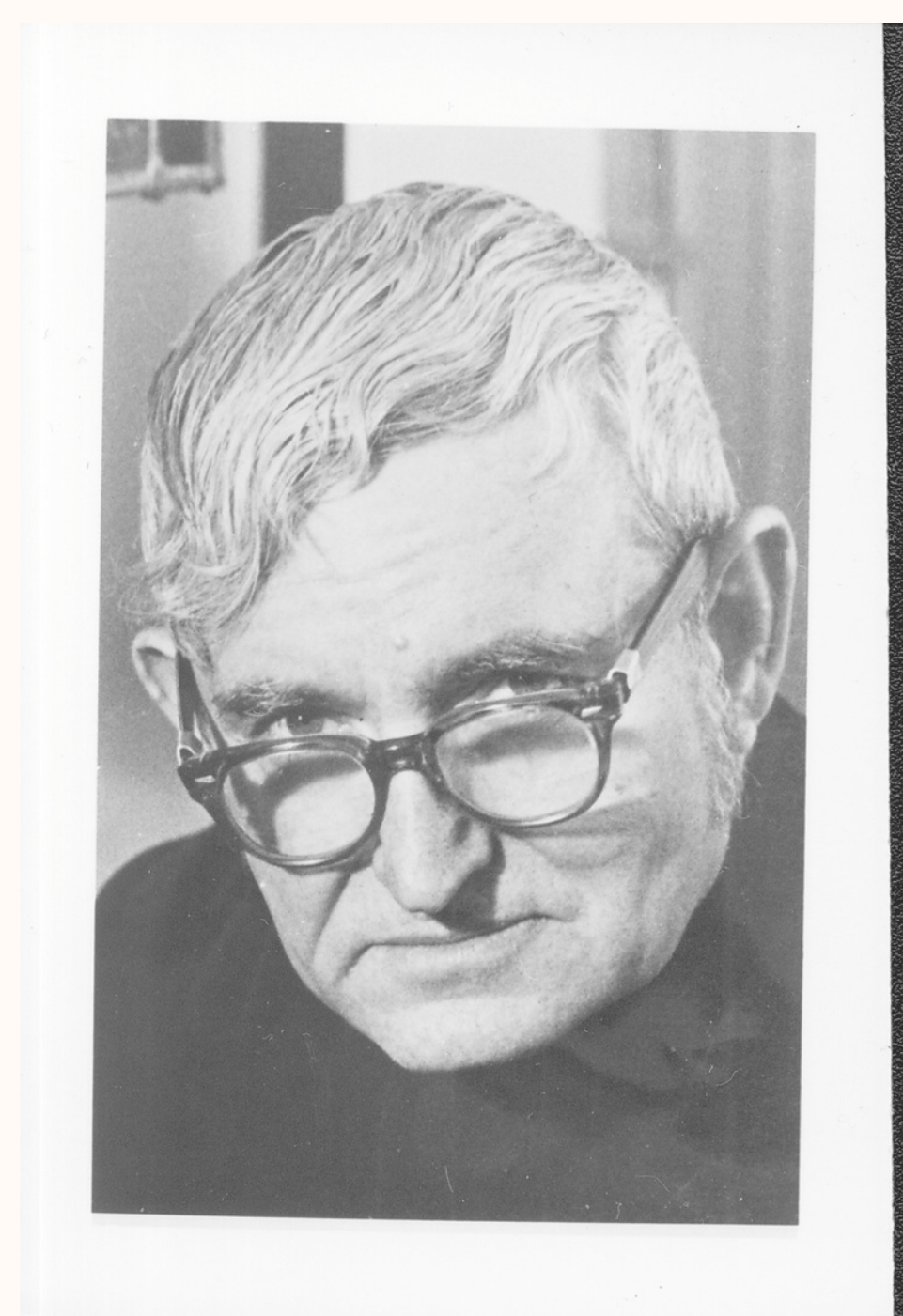
Myron Dale McKinney was a former faculty artist, teacher, and head of the Art Department at Oklahoma State University. He is best known for his work as a sculptor, but also worked in painting, printmaking, and music. Born in Hollister, Oklahoma, Dale was one of 7 siblings growing up on a farm. The days were filled with hard work, while the evenings he spent huddled around the radio listening to his favorite music, jazz. He was able to attend college and eventually earned his Master's in History. He started work as an artist when he was 20, working in watercolor. He began experimenting with music and sculpture following a visit to Houston in the 1950's, where he first encountered kinetic sculpture. Dale completed a large music library over his career, which had been essentially lost and forgotten following his death in 1991. Not much was understood about the way his music and sculpture worked together, or even what his motivation to create these works was.

Introduction to Dale McKinney

- Dale McKinney was born in Hollister, OK on May 19th, 1911, and passed away on June 11th, 1994, at the age of 83.
- A renowned artist and former head of the Art Department at OSU, his work inspired many of his students and colleagues. He is best known for his kinetic sculpture and unusual music that accompanied these works.
- Dale also worked with printmaking and painting.
- He has a military background, earning the rank of Sergeant in the U.S. Army Air Corps, and served during World War II.
- Drawing from a background in mechanical engineering, he constructed kinetic sculptures made of old parts and moving pieces to design more complicated machines.
- Dale's experimental music takes influence from nature, the Oklahoma landscape, and his love of classical and jazz music.
- Following his death, the extensive sound library was stored and long forgotten in the back of the Bartlett Center for Visual Arts. They had not been touched until around the late 2010's, when Dr. Louise Siddons began working on identifying these tapes.



"I decided that these sounds were as important as the visual aspect of the sculpture."



"The art will speak for itself..."

Method

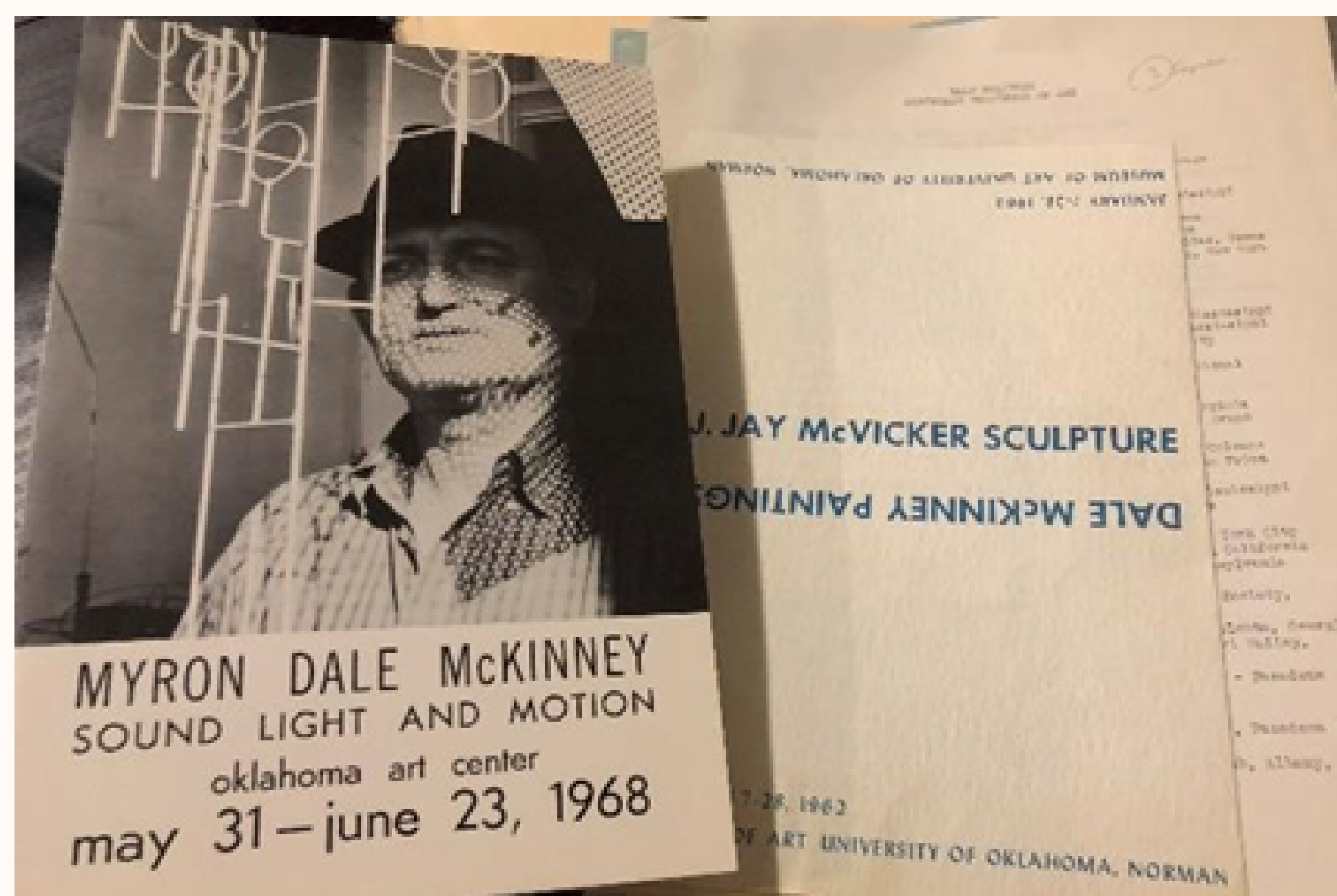
Beginning in Fall of 2020, I began my work studying the music library of Dale McKinney, which had been kept in storage behind the Bartlett Center for the Visual Arts before being moved due to flooding. I was tasked with taking inventories of each box, many of which were reel to reel with a small fraction being cassette tapes. Once a complete inventory was taken, I worked with the Oklahoma Oral History program to locate interviews of Dale McKinney, providing further insight into the influences of his music and sculpture. Within the large boxes of audio reels lay documents detailing prior teaching experience and exhibition catalogues, including handwritten notes to colleagues.

Once all tapes were counted, I worked to digitize a few samples of the cassettes found in the collection. I also worked with the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art to locate footage of Dale McKinney's studio, as well as samples of his kinetic sculpture in motion.

Below is an image of one of these documents which further educated my research.



Samples of Dale McKinney's tapes From start to end:
Galaxy Mach 1, Rain Storm + Multi-Rhythms, Bird Sounds [Untitled], Shifted Mock duet, Probably Best Mocker Ever, Okla Sounds, Mix Chimes Sculpture, OK Thunderstorm, Splinters Breaking



Above: Examples of Dale McKinney's exhibition catalogues



Above: Video of one of Dale's kinetic Sculptures



Above: Film tour of Dale McKinney's home studio and various kinetic sculptures

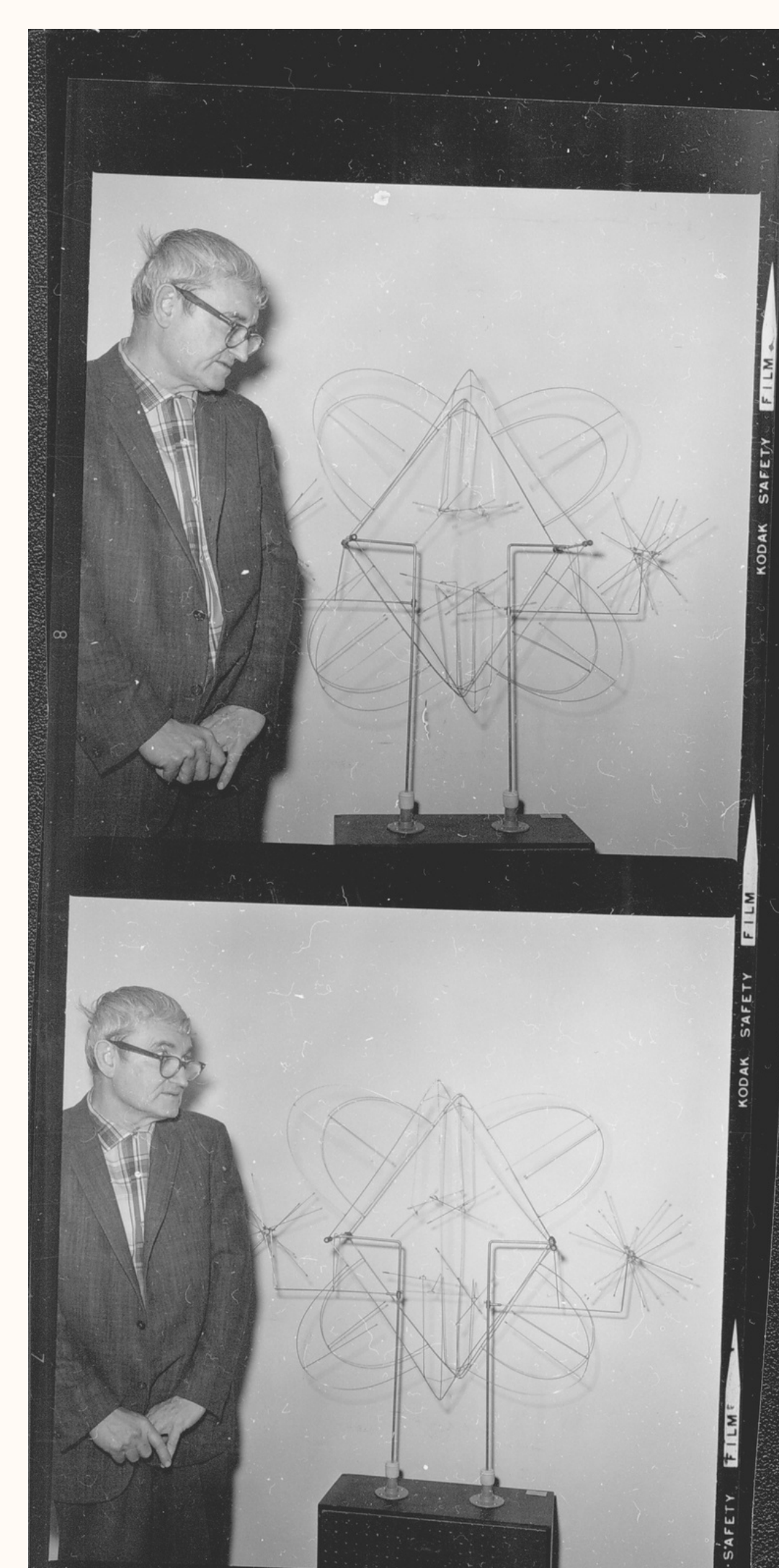
Results

Through my research, I was able to conclude that a combination of influences from a love for nature, the Oklahoma landscape, and a passion for experimentation impacted the sounds we hear accompany these sculptures. Finding footage of working sculptures with audio in archives long forgotten reveal the unusual nature of Dale McKinney's artworks. Consistent themes of the music include bird sounds, water, and guitar riffs layered in complex ways that create an unusual or sometimes unsettling atmosphere around a sculpture. Drawing on natural light, strange audio, and stranger sculpture created a visual and auditory experience that was unlike any other during his time.



Discussion

Going into the project, there were many unknown factors. Prior to this, there were only a handful of interviews by Dale talking about his sculpture and the influences that inspired his work. His own life experiences and interests in music are evident in the music he created for his sculptures, and his work is a direct reflection of his imagination. Dale always dabbled and experimented with new techniques to supplement his art. His work goes to show us that no matter what you start with, as long as you continue honing your craft, you are able to create something otherworldly and influential in the hearts of countless people.



Acknowledgments

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