

Valentine's Day synchronicity: heartbeats make music in a Melbourne park

Love and connectedness are central themes in a dreamy, relaxation-inducing installation at MPavilion



A visitor reclines in one of the Hynapods at the M*Sync installation. Photograph: Nicole Eckersley

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This year's MPavilion, Melbourne's temporary summer events venue that sits in the gardens opposite the National Gallery of Victoria, is a light, airy, bamboo hut-like structure designed by Bijoy Jain of Studio Mumbai. It's the perfect place to cosy up in a hammock and listen to some dreamy ambient music - but what if the dreamy, ambient music is your own heartbeat?

One of the final installations at MPavilion, just in time for Valentine's Day, is M*Sync: a performance art event that has nothing to do with 90s boy bands, and the focus of which is a biofeedback-themed installation that focuses on the heartbeat.

Co-curated Jonnine Standish and Jessie French, M*Sync is a collaboration between local and international musicians and Tasmania's Unconscious Collective, a group of artists whose work

focuses on relaxation and exploring shared experiences. Climb into one of four snugly red hammocks called Hypnapods, hanging from the MPavilion ceiling, knitted on RMIT's high-tech knitting machines, and your heartbeat, via a built-in sensor, becomes one note in a four-part biofeedback harmony playing through the pavilion's speakers.

Members of the collective, dressed in floating white cheesecloth, rock you gently. (Our attendant, Anand, turns out to have a secret life as a hospital doctor, and his bedside manner is unimpeachable.) You're invited to consider having a small snooze. It's lovely and soothing and Matt Warren and Ritchie Cyngler's composition, of which your heartbeat becomes a part, is more underwater bathysphere than hospital monitor. The only downside, really, is that you have to get out after 15 minutes and let someone else have a turn.



Dancers Niharika Senapati and Benjamin Hancock improvise a dance piece to the music of Tropic of Cancer. Photograph: Nicole Eckersley

The work grew out of Unconscious Collective's Motel Dreaming - an overnight "dream incubator" at Dark Mofo in 2014, which perhaps appropriately ran at the same time as Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's Pulse Room at Mona, an installation in which sensors sent hundreds of lightbulbs flashing in sync with audience members' heartbeats. The intention of the Hypnapod is to explore somatic connectedness - the biological phenomenon of synchronising with other creatures - but alone in the cosy red pod, the exploration of "hypnagogic states" - that comfortable in-between place where you're just nodding off into a nap - seems more relevant.

On Saturday the pods became part of a performance built around the heart. Warren and Cyngler recorded audience members' heartbeats and live-remixed their whispers of "I love you", segueing into a set by the Sydney sound artist Gail Priest. M*Sync co-curators and a member of indie protopunk band HTRK, Jonnine Standish, took the stage with her new project Queens of the Circulating Library, followed by the Australian debut of the LA band Tropic of Cancer, wearing heart monitors and building their set live over their own heartbeats. Two dancers - Chunky Move regulars Niharika Senapati and Benjamin Hancock - squirmed out of the Hypnapods halfway through the set to perform the evening's highlight, a semi-improvised contemporary dance piece, in the classic modern dance tradition of beige underwear and displays of impressive core strength, to Tropic of Cancer's super-slow ambient beats.

Despite the themes of Valentine's Day love and connectedness, M*Sync is a work that is in no way diminished by going along solo. Short of squeezing into a Hypnapod with someone special and

confusing the sensor, there isn't really too much room for romance: your pod is your pod, your musical experience is your musical experience, and contemporary dance is not known to be a hot ticket for a first date. Beyond swaths of red fabric and a sprinkling of rose petals, there's not a huge amount of romantic or somatic connectedness to be found.

That said, it's hard to go past an installation like this for immersive, low-key, artistic fun - kids and adults alike have great fun in the hammocks, the music is accomplished and the dancers are top-notch - and full marks on the hypnagogic states; I have rarely felt so inclined towards a pleasant nap in public.

*. M*Sync runs until 14 February; MPavilion is open to the public until 18 February*