

The silent talking heads of Harry Shearer

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Harry Shearer is taking a serious look at today's media. The comedic actor, known for voicing multiple characters in "The Simpsons," for years has written for and acted on "Saturday Night Live" and starred in the rock group spoof documentary "Spinal Tap." But there is another side to Shearer and it can be seen in the multiscreen video



installation, "Harry Shearer: The Silent Echo Chamber" at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield.

Shearer's social commentary is in the form of video art and the concept is simple: Show famous talking heads without the talk, just before they go live on television. The silence drastically alters our perception of who these people are.

Video footage on 10 screens in the museum's lobby is primarily from the 2008 presidential election. Joe Biden stuffs a Danish pastry in his mouth and quickly checks for loose crumbs on his shirt. John McCain stares stonily into the camera without acknowledging the hovering person fixing his tie. Barack Obama is contemplative while studying a newspaper, then offers a closed-mouthed smile. Larry King furrows his brow, scowls, licks his lips and bites his fingernails. Henry Kissinger's blank stare pushes the viewer's gaze to the enormity of his double chin. In all, the camera takes in the alter personas while they are psychologically primping to turn on the charm.



Shearer was at the museum's opening last Sunday and spoke informally to a crowd of about 100 people. He explained about "The Silent Echo Chamber": "The politicians and the media people who talk about things have conspired, unwillingly perhaps, to create

this echo chamber effect. They start saying something and it gets repeated because of the profusion of 24-hour cable and the Internet. It's sort of the modern version of conventional wisdom and the pace of the repetition is a metaphor of the echo chamber. The silent echo chamber is the same thing without words." With 55 years in the entertainment industry (he was a child actor on "The Jack Benny Show" in the 1950s) Shearer, now 66, claims television has changed from a visual medium to verbal one, a trend driven by advertising.

"I came out of radio, so television was being presented as this profoundly visual medium. In the early days, they were showing off what the visual possibilities were," he says. "But budgets being what they are today, visual content means you have to leave your little studio and occasionally go out somewhere and shoot something. What the 500-channel universe dictates is that nobody has the money to do more than that. You can sell just as many commercials when you have two people sitting in a cardboard closet with microphones on whether it's sports or news or cooking."

The silent talking heads undoubtedly reveal the small but telling subtleties of behavior that usually pass us by when focusing on the spoken word. In Shearer's piece we see a complacent Hillary Clinton with a Mona Lisa smile morphing into laughter, dimples puffing out. Michael Moore works his lips, Chris Mathews sneers at the camera and Wolf Blitzer hides his mouth by holding a large piece of white paper between his lips to free up his hands. It's as mesmerizing as peeking through a keyhole at the unsuspecting.

Shearer was inspired to collect video outtakes of famous people several years ago when he saw footage of Richard Nixon waiting to give his resignation speech. Nixon, who shunned small talk, suddenly opened up minutes before giving up the most powerful office in the world.

"Ten minutes before he gives his resignation speech in the oval office, he starts to make small talk and joke around. It was so revealing of his character and it hit me that there was this world of imagery that we don't normally see." For Shearer, the footage of people being readied to present their public images was boundless.

Four years ago, Shearer compiled similar footage from the 2004 presidential election and showed it at the Conner Contemporary Art in Washington, DC. He says the current show at the Aldrich Museum grew out of that show.

"It was about people in the election cycle and included the famous footage of John Edwards fixing his hair. It was something you didn't normally see and it got spread all over the Internet."

The running theme in all of Shearer's video installations is that television's constant "babble" robs us of the medium's visual roots. The work reinforces the imagery by subtracting the ubiquitous talk from the talking heads. As Shearer puts it: "I just thought if you take all that away how nourishing it is to just watch behavior, something you rarely get a chance to do if you're being yakked at." `