

Elizabeth Fischer

Review: the Pitt Gallery,
Saturday, December 9

*Singer drops rock bands,
scores synthesized success*

After many years of writing strong songs and giving strong performances fettered only by the scope of the bands that she has worked with, singer Elizabeth Fischer has dropped the rock band format, bought a sophisticated digital keyboard that can give her all the accompaniment she needs, and struck out on her own as a solo performer. It's a good

move. At the Pitt International Gallery last Saturday night she gave a performance that entirely justified her brave decisions.

There are no categories quite broad enough to confine or define exactly what it is that Fischer does. Her chosen format suggests equally performance art and folk music, with the nod going to folk: Fischer's endearingly incompetent—or casual—attitude to the technology that she uses is a far cry from the steely proficiency of a Laurie Anderson. Her electronic reshuffling of a sentimental Hungarian ballad, a favourite of her late father's, momentarily suggested the organ-and-drum-machine lounge singers of airport cocktail bars before flowering into something far richer and far stranger.

Her melodic gifts, and the wonderful ways in which she uses her limited but powerful voice, owe something to the European art-song tradition. But while most art-songs reek of the conservatory, Fischer's compositions have the zest of a contemporary Brecht, and indeed at least one of her melodic lines soared with the sophisticated passion of an Eisler or a Weill. Her lyrics are like Kafka short stories put into song, but her synthesized arrangements and her overall attitude could not have existed without the influence of the English art/pop bands of the early '80s and all of the gloom-rock bands from the Doors on.

But Fischer's work is no rag-bag collection of influences and clichés. There's no one else doing performances like hers. Her considerable intellectual gifts, her curious charm, and her remarkable, individualistic voice make it clear that while her work can be analyzed in terms of its parts, it must finally be taken as a coherent, unique whole.

She has just come back from a cross-country tour that has brought her rave reviews from critics and fans in Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg, and other less cosmopolitan places. Her work is admired by some of the most creative minds in the New York avant-garde, including the radical composer/guitarist Elliot Sharp, who has produced demo tapes for her and used her voice on his own *In the Land of the Yahoos*.

□ Alex Varty