

NEA ARTS

Number 1, 2018

Women in the Arts

GALVANIZING,
ENCOURAGING,
INSPIRING



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THIS ISSUE

There has not been a standard roadmap to follow when it comes to making a living in the arts. For women, it has been more difficult—for women of color, even more so. It isn't that there has been a dearth of women artists: In the 1930s, Florence Price was the first African-American woman to have her composition performed by a major orchestra. Amy Beach was a prolific composer in the late 1800s, although her compositions were only published under her married name, "Mrs. H.H.A. Beach." These examples are representative of the challenges of being publicly acknowledged as a woman artist.

Still, less than 25 percent of produced plays are written by women. Women artists make up only three to five percent of major art museum collections in the U.S. and Europe. In films, female characters receive about half the screen time and dialogue as male characters. And a recent Grantmakers in the Arts study found that though there are more women in arts management, "men predominantly held upper-management positions and earned significantly higher salaries than women."

We focused this issue on women in the arts to give voice to the barriers they continue to face, and where there are reasons for hope. We are galvanized by the roles Diane Rodriguez has written for Latina actresses and by Wendy Red Star's empowerment of Native women in her artwork. We are encouraged by Susan Fisher Sterling's visionary leadership at the National Museum of Women in the Arts and how Brenda Laurel refused to believe that video games were of no interest to girls. We are inspired by the ways choreographer Bebe Miller has celebrated the "awkward grace" of the body through dance and by how 2018 NEA Jazz Master Dianne Reeves has followed in the footsteps of the giants who preceded her, like Betty Carter, Ella Fitzgerald, and Sarah Vaughan.

As we celebrate the accomplishments and impact of these women, we hope you'll feel equally galvanized, encouraged, and inspired.

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About the cover:

2018 NEA Jazz Master Dianne Reeves performing with Sherrie Maricle and the Diva Jazz Orchestra during the 2017 NEA Jazz Masters Tribute Concert at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. Photo by Shannon Finney





Diane Rodriguez (right) with director Nancy Keystone (left) and playwright Suzan-Lori Parks at the grand finale performance of Parks' 365 Days/365 Plays National Festival in Los Angeles, California, 2007. Photo by Ryan Miller/Capture Imaging

DIANE RODRIGUEZ

Sharing the Latina Experience

BY REBECCA SUTTON

Writer, director, and performer Diane Rodriguez has long been a part of the Latino artistic community, making her professional theater debut with El Teatro Campesino in the mid-1970s. In subsequent roles as co-director of the Latino Theater Initiative, board president of the Theatre Communications Group (TCG), associate artistic director of the Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles, and a member of the National Council on the Arts, she has consistently used her position to uplift traditionally unheard voices, most passionately those of Latinas.

In recent years, she has found her own voice as a playwright, sculpting title characters who are all strong women: *Living Large* centers on a Latina widow who remakes her life on her own; *Pitch Like a Girl* revolves around a Latina social justice worker seeking to at least crack, if not break, the glass ceiling; and *A Sweetheart Deal* follows a young Latina's trajectory into becoming a leader within the United Farm Workers Union. She has also reached an entirely new generation of young girls through her work writing and consulting on scripts for Mattel's live Barbie productions and the Disney television show *Elena of Avalor*, which focuses on the adventures of a Latina princess. In the following edited interview, Rodriguez discusses the challenges and joys she has faced throughout her career as a Chicana theater artist.

PLANTING ROOTS

Being a Latina, Chicana, has affected my career greatly. I was going to go to graduate school. I applied to California Institute of the Arts, and I got turned down. The alternative was to join El Teatro Campesino—that was the best thing that ever happened to me. It opened my eyes to possibility, but it also rooted me in home, and in where I came from. It rooted me in the fields that my parents worked in, in the canneries that my mother toiled in as we were growing up. I never forgot the roots that I came from as I was launched into the world. Even now, even when I'm not necessarily doing Latino-specific work, those roots keep me anchored.

MAKING ROOM FOR NEW VOICES AND LEADERS

A great civilization and a great city need culture. Large organizations are not our enemy. All that all of us are asking is that centers of culture are shared, that various voices are heard, and that we don't decimate one voice for the other. So I appreciate the large theaters and the small theaters. We have to think about the

whole ecosystem because we depend on each other. I think it's the same with women. We are asking to share in the leadership, and have a space where we're not crowded out, where we are heard, and where we don't feel that the doors are slammed in our faces. From popular culture to high art, it's difficult. We're still in dark times in that arena.

I think leadership in the theater is the number one challenge still. There are still very few women of color in managerial positions and executive positions. There has never been a Latina who has run a LORT [League of Resident Theatres] theater, and certainly not a Mexican-American woman. I have tried to get in those doors.

We still need more writers of color. We've made advances, certainly, and there are a lot of talented writers. But I do think that it's very, very hard for a woman of color to be a playwright full-time. I think that will change with the generations—I'm very hopeful for that. There are organizations like Theatre Communications Group that really help us, giving us the platforms, setting us up. We need more organizations that can help in that way. It's happening, but it's slow.

▼ Rodriguez (middle) with playwright/director Young Jean Lee (left) and cast members in rehearsal for the Center Theatre Group's production of *Straight White Men* in 2015. Photo by Craig Schwartz



LEADERSHIP IN THEATER AS A CHICANA

When you have a board of directors who don't have a relationship with a Mexican-American woman, aside from the woman who cleans their home, it's hard for them to make the leap. We don't have an Oprah, necessarily. Oprah has really done great things in representing black women—it's been fantastic. But for Latinas and for Mexican-American women, we don't have that person that's holding the torch and lighting the way for us.

So it's very hard for [other] people to make a leap and say, "Yes, they can lead. I believe in them! They're not going to transform our theater into one of social justice," which is the big fear. Or, "They're not going to open the floodgates and transform our theaters to the point where we won't be able to see ourselves onstage." I often want to embrace people and say, "If I'm the leader, I am not going to forget your voice. We're going to share this resource, and this privilege we have of seeing stories onstage." But those in power still do not believe that.

FINDING FREEDOM IN PLAYWRITING

[Playwriting] is a new area for me. I feel quite liberated by it. I can say whatever I want to say. You write roles for women! It's so exciting to see [actresses] do your work and feel like their talents are being used to the utmost. They're able to play three-dimensional characters and they're able to really investigate a human condition, or a human struggle. I strive for my plays to be as universal as they can be. So I would like more time to write, actually.

I want to write plays about the middle class and struggle. There's a huge strata of Latinas that live in the United States who've gone to school, who are middle class, who are very invested in American values, and who we never see onstage or in film. They were important for me to write about, and they continue to be important for me to write about. I believe that even if we're middle class, we're still very much rooted in our communities. I like women who have a lot to learn. I like women who learn how



to listen deeply. I like women who have a sense of humor. I think that humor is the biggest weapon to change people's minds.

LIFTING UP THE NEXT GENERATION

I've been the president of TCG. It was fun being able to sit at the head of a table, and to be able to encourage other women who never thought they would be at that table to speak their mind. I think that it's your role when you are a leader to mentor other women. Some don't need mentorship. Some have amazing loud and clear voices. You appreciate that, and you want to share that. You want to hear what they have to say, and integrate their opinions. But others are a little shy, so I think as a leader, it's our responsibility to really encourage and mentor. I've always done that.

There are so many amazing women that are coming up in the world that are so smart and so educated. All of my young colleagues give me great hope. If I were to leave and refocus my career only on my art-making, I would feel secure that these ladies would be able to move forward and create a world in which I could still work. They are really trying to do right by opening up doors and sharing resources and going and diving deep all over the country to reach out to voices that are not often heard.

Sometimes I ask the question, should I be filled with rage or should I be patient? Patience, I think, for me is about hope. I think you can be enraged and still have hope. ▲

▲ Ruth Livier and Geoffrey Rivas in Rodriguez's *The Sweetheart Deal*, which she also directed, during the world premiere presentation by the Latino Theater Company at the Los Angeles Theatre Center in 2017. Photo by Grettel Cortes

Interactive technology researcher
and designer Brenda Laurel.

BRENDA LAUREL

Girls Just Wanna...

Play Video Games

BY PAULETTE BEETE

All photos courtesy of Brenda Laurel

In the early 1970s, Brenda Laurel was studying theater at Ohio State University. One night a friend invited her to take a look at some computer imaging he was working on, and that, as they say, changed everything. As she recalled, "I kind of fell to my knees and said, 'Oh, my God, whatever this is, I want a piece of it.'" About a year later, that same friend founded Cybervision, an early computer game console company, and asked Laurel to work with him on creating interactive fairytales. Having since become heavily engaged in interactive theater, Laurel jumped at the chance. From there she moved on to Atari and several other companies in the video game arena.

But Laurel became frustrated with the tired chestnut she frequently encountered: that girls don't play video games. So in the early 1990s, she undertook a research study to find out if and why that was true. She then used that research to springboard her own company Purple Moon, which developed games specifically for girls and helped prepare young women to join the computer age.

Today, Laurel has shifted her career from video games to interactive technology. Recent projects include developing a mixed-reality system for schoolyard gardens and working with the U.S. Department of Defense on how to use biofeedback wearables to combat post-traumatic stress. We spoke with Laurel about breaking into the video gaming boys club, how she amplified her research on gender and technology into games for girls, and what she thinks her legacy has been as one of the industry's pioneering women.

BREAKING INTO THE BOYS' CLUB

[One of my early jobs had] an extensively male environment. I can remember going to the women's room and there were all these guys in there smoking marijuana. I said, "Now there's a woman in here that needs to go to the bathroom, so you guys need to find another place to do this." It wasn't onerous at the beginning. I felt special. Most women who started early did have that moment where they thought, "Hey, I'm hot stuff. I'm the only woman in the room."

But quickly it became clear that there were obstacles to promotion, and it was difficult to get the respect of the men I had to manage, except for the ones I hired myself. At that time, resisting it was an individual thing; there wasn't really a group of women saying, "Hey, we're not getting treated fairly."

As I lived on through the industry, it was clear that my voice wasn't being taken as seriously as anyone else's, and I think this was compounded by the fact that I developed a strong allergy to the kinds of games that were being produced. All the shooting didn't really do much for me, and I knew there was a huge audience out there that wasn't playing video games yet.

THE MYTH OF GIRLS AND VIDEO GAMES

There was a steadfast belief in the game industry that girls didn't play games, and didn't want to play games. The origin of [the video game] industry was really vertically integrated. It was games made for young men, by young men, sold to young men in places where young men went, [such as] retail outlets that were pretty gender exclusive. There was an attempt at Activision to do a Barbie game in 1987, but there it was on the shelf among all the war games in a place where girls and mothers didn't go. The designer of that game told me in an interview that the game mechanic was throwing marshmallows at the mall because girls weren't very good at trajectory, and marshmallows moved more slowly. [That game] sank like a stone and it reified the folklore about girls and games that had been there since the beginning.

DEVELOPING VIDEO GAMES FOR GIRLS

Part of our initial goal [with my company Purple Moon] was to design games that would get girls' hands on the computer, and [allow them to] gain some comfort and facility with the technology that would bootstrap them into life as we know it.

[An important finding from my research] was that girls at the 'tween' age tend to have two different lenses on themselves. On the one hand, they're concerned about their outer social life. On the other hand, they have an inner life that is very different. If you put those two things across from one another, you have a commonality that's narrative, and there's a list of correspondences that go across the two views of one's self but have different components. How popular am I? How successful am I socially? Both of those things collapse down to one's view of one's self. But they have different expressions depending on which part of your head you're in.

[That] led us to build two series of games, one for the outer social self, Rockett games, and one for the inner, secret self, the Secret Paths games. In the social games, [their characters] tended to be about two years older than themselves, because we found that that's how girls think about themselves when they're thinking socially. Like a kid in sixth grade will think of themselves as an eighth-grader, for example. In the inner, secret self, you are the age you are, maybe even a little younger, because there's a lot of vulnerability in there. So we designed identical characters but expressed them differently art-wise and behavior-wise in the two sets of games. What's interesting to me is that girls never had any trouble recognizing the same character in the two different styles.

[We also learned] that girls of this age, as do boys, have some pretty specific personal and social needs that we can address through these games—insecurity, frustration, lack of courage, feeling small, feeling looked down on, having trouble with your friends. We wanted to make sure that we touched on [these issues] in the games. The games were actually an emotional rehearsal space for taking control of your life. We became kind of evangelical about that mission, but you couldn't do it in a way that wasn't fun, or it wouldn't work.

WOMEN IN INTERACTIVE TECHNOLOGY

I think [Purple Moon] cracked open a little bit of interest in gender-inclusive gaming—not girl games, but gender-inclusive games. Its major influence was on what happened on the web. There was stuff for girls and gender-inclusive stuff on the web very early in web terms, in 2000-2001. Very quickly girls migrated to the web as opposed to standalone games and game consoles because it was a more gender-friendly space and it was a social space. There began at

that time also a growing population of girls who played console games, girl gamers, and they exist today as a very strong component of the console game market. So there was change in who played even the boy games.

The fight continues but it looks a lot healthier than it used to. I think the place where it's not so healthy is for the women who are in game design. There have been horrible repercussions for women who have [criticized gender dynamics in] the gaming industry. I'm thinking now of Brianna Wu and Elizabeth LaPensée. These are

people who've done amazing work and who get death threats. So it's still a rough row to hoe, but huge progress has been made. There have been women who have redesigned armor for women in combat games so that it's not looking like lingerie. That sounds like a little thing, but it's a big thing. We're seeing a lot more female protagonists in action games now than we did before, and that's a big deal. I think we're slowly but surely gaining equal footing. 🌀

▼ A sampling of products produced by Purple Moon.



Fall, from the Four Seasons series, 2006,
by Wendy Red Star.



Wendy Red Star

OWNING YOUR POWER

BY MORGAN MENTZER

All photos courtesy of Wendy Red Star

Growing up on the Apsáalooke (Crow) reservation in Montana, Wendy Red Star was immersed in Crow culture and art. Her father was a rock musician, her uncle was a painter, and her grandmother sewed traditional Apsáalooke regalia and beadwork. When reflecting on her childhood, Red Star said that although the reservation may have been poor economically, “culturally, I grew up very rich.”

Today, Red Star explores her cultural heritage and the role of Native women through a variety of media, including photography, sculpture, video, fiber arts, and performance. Her work has been shown at institutions ranging from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Fondation Cartier pour l' Art Contemporain in Paris. Her exhibition *Wendy Red Star: The Maniacs (We're Not the Best, But We're Better Than The Rest)*, which draws inspiration from her father's musical career, is on view through March 18 at New Mexico State University, with NEA support.

Red Star has continued to pass down the family's artistic legacy through her ten-year-old daughter, Beatrice. This mother-daughter duo has been collaborating for four years, and demonstrates what “owning your power” as a Native-American woman looks like. In her own words, Red Star tells the story of her artwork and her culture.



▲ Red Star's grandmother, Amy Bright Wings Red Star.

THE INFLUENCE OF MY GRANDMOTHER

The Crow Nation is a matrilineal society, so everything is passed through the mother's side. Since my mother is white, I go by my [paternal] grandmother's side. I really love tracing Crow history and culture through my grandmother's line.

My whole life, my grandmother, Amy Bright Wings Red Star, was always making something in regards to Crow traditional outfits. Most of my memories are of walking into her little craft room. She'd be behind a sewing machine or drawing beadwork designs. But I'd never thought of her as an artist. Being an indigenous person, I thought that was just the lifestyle. It was hard for me to see that in a different light.

I didn't realize that she was a big influence to my practice until much later when I took an interest in sewing and making traditional regalia. Now I would consider sewing to be one of my greatest talents. It surprises me each time I make a traditional Crow outfit or something with fiber. I think just from being exposed to seeing my grandmother making things, I was absorbing that [knowledge].

LEARNING TO EMBRACE IDENTITY

When I left the reservation, "otherness" came up. Even folks who thought they were fairly liberal would position me into this "other" box. I felt that a lot when I was in graduate school, especially with identity-based artwork and the culturally pointed artwork I was making. I noticed my professors weren't able to really talk about my work, or they were uncomfortable positioning themselves in a place where they didn't have knowledge. That was really damaging for me. I started to think, "Maybe this is not the right type of work. Maybe I need to make work that is less about my culture."

I used to hear expressions like "identity-based artwork is dead," and I would feel a sense of guilt about my work. But race, identity, and gender are not dead. They're very much things that we need to be talking about. Now that I am older and have more confidence, I realize that the work I'm making is important and has a place and position in the world.

As indigenous people, through colonization, we're having to deal with some of the same dilemmas that other women are experiencing as well. There's sexism—women are limited to certain things. I created the hashtag #ApsaalookeFeminist, and anytime I experience something or make something that is historically and culturally specific to Crow women, I'll photograph it on Instagram with the hashtag. I believe that within the feminist movement there needs to be room for this Apsaalooke feminist.

MAKING SPACE FOR NATIVE WOMEN ARTISTS

I found that Native collections with Native curators at museums were recognizing that their collections were flawed in that things written about objects in the collection were all from non-indigenous people. So curators are realizing that we need to bring Native perspectives into museums. I see a lot of Native

artists being recognized in exhibitions—I feel like that’s a shift and a change. And women artists are doing shows that point out, “There’s a lack of women in this collection,” or, “There’s only one woman in this exhibition and 20 men!” The covers are being pulled off the bed to expose those [discrepancies]. I see certain institutions stepping up to the plate and saying, “Look, we want to do something about that.” I definitely feel like my work has been part of that movement.

I curated an exhibition at the Missoula Art Museum called *Our Side*, which is a small group show focused on four indigenous women. I wanted to work with these particular women because they’re strong artists in their own regard, and they’re working in ways that unify all the different aspects that are important to indigenous people. For me, it’s really important to support indigenous artists, and indigenous women artists.

I want [Native women] to have a place and a position within the art world. I don’t want it to be this anomaly, or special division. I feel like Native men are making a little bit more headway than Native women. That’s something that I think is so important: to have the indigenous female perspective and voice positioned in the art world. I would hope that we continue to see more Native women showing in big shows and exhibitions.

INTERGENERATIONAL COLLABORATION

In 2014, I was offered a solo exhibition at the Portland Art Museum. I was working on a body of work called *Medicine Crow and the 1880 Crow Peace Delegation*. As part of the show, there were delegation portraits of Crow Chiefs. One night I was working on the portraits and my daughter Beatrice, who was seven at the time, wanted to play. I told her, “I can’t right now, but here, take a stack of these Xerox photos, and you can play

▼ Wendy Red Star’s daughter Beatrice wearing an elk tooth dress that Red Star made for her.



with these.” A few minutes later, Bea came back to my desk, and she plopped down one of the Xerox photos of the chiefs that she had colored all over the top of. It was beautiful and free, and everything I needed to help round out the show. It was her interpretation of these chiefs who were her ancestors, and it was a perfect way to include the next generation’s voice.

What solidified that we could have a future together in collaboration was, during the opening, she wanted to talk about her work. I thought, “I’m going to be talking about my work. So, okay, I’ll indulge you in this.” She spoke about her work in front of around 100 people. She has this gift of public speaking. That is when I realized that, “Wow, we can actually do something!” We’ve been able to collaborate at numerous museums

and have a project coming up in 2019 at the Newark Museum in New Jersey. It’s been a really great experience for myself and Beatrice as well.

I want Beatrice to have confidence and to own her power. Those are the tools that I’d like her to have in anything that she does. I feel like within my own life I haven’t really done that. I’m doing a lot of work now where I’m realizing, “That’s my power, and I can own that.” It’s exciting to see her in positions where I already see that she’s confident and owning her power. 🌀

Morgan Mentzer is an intern in the NEA Office of Public Affairs in 2017-2018.

▼ **Apsáalooke**
Feminist #2 by Wendy
Red Star, with her
daughter Beatrice.





2018 NEA Jazz
Master Dianne
Reeves. Photo by
Jerris Madison

DIANNE REEVES

Finding My Voice

BY DON BALL AND JOSEPHINE REED

Growing up in Denver, Colorado, 2018 NEA Jazz Master Dianne Reeves was surrounded by music. “I grew up with many generations in my family,” she said, “and so I listened to and loved the music that everybody would play and listen to, because I would see how they celebrated the music.” Reeves has gone on to be one of jazz’s great vocalists, with a far-reaching range stretching across musical genres.

There were many influences in Reeves’ life and musical career, including many notable women. From her Aunt Kay, who taught her the blues at an early age; to Bennie L. Williams, a renowned music teacher in Denver and founder of the Spiritual Voices choir group; to the inspiration of NEA Jazz Masters Ella Fitzgerald, Betty Carter, and Sarah Vaughan, these women have had a lasting impression on Reeves and her music. She talked about the female influences on her music during her interview with the NEA’s Josephine Reed in December 2017. An excerpt of that interview follows.



▲ Reeves as a young singer. Photo courtesy of Dianne Reeves

AUNT KAY

I had this one aunt, Kay, who played the piano and sang the blues. Her sisters and brothers were a part of Vaudeville, and they did all of this wonderful music. But she would sing these blues that were like Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith, that had these dual meanings.

When we'd get together during the holidays, she would play, and my uncle would play bass, and she would always teach me one of those songs. She'd teach me these lyrics, and I'd be singing them and doing the dance that she showed me, how to shimmy, and the adults would be cracking up laughing.

It took me to about the age of 22 to realize what I was actually singing about.

DISCOVERING I COULD SING

My junior high school teacher, Bennie Williams, was really more than a music teacher. She taught us poetry. She helped us put on school shows. She did all these kinds of things to help us stand in each other's shoes, and it was a really powerful time.

That's when I discovered that I could sing. I'll never forget; I was on the stage singing, and I didn't know how to move or anything, and she said, "Put your arm out." I put my arm out, and I just left it there, and she's like, "Put it down." But I'm singing, and I'm loving how I feel singing, and I'm loving the energy that is coming from being able to do this.

I remember my grandmother used to always say, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket." But when I realized that music was inside of me, I decided I'm putting all my eggs in one basket.

FINDING MY VOICE

In high school, we had a really great jazz program that I finally was able to be a part of. They only wanted instrumentalists; they didn't want any singers. But I made my way in, and I remember the conductor of the band wrote a lot of arrangements and asked me what I wanted to sing.

There was this record that Sarah Vaughan did with Michel Legrand. She did "What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life," and I loved the arrangement. I loved the way she sang it, because her voice just seemed to go on forever, every color, every note—her range was beautiful and wide.

I learned the song verbatim, just like she sang it, and we would perform it with the high school jazz band. One day, my uncle said, "You know, that's probably one of the two or three takes that she did. But after that, I'm sure she never, ever sang it like that again."

He said, "You find your own way to sing the song," and that was the beginning of me trying to find my own voice.

IN ELLA'S SHOES

I was in high school, and there was a club called the Warehouse. On the weekends, they would have a jam session [in the downstairs area called the Tool Shed], and I ended up getting a gig there. They tell me Ella Fitzgerald's coming.

I'm like, "Oh, my God." I went to see her upstairs. She swung all this Beatles music, and I didn't even know you could do that. She was

supposed to be there three nights, and she ended her appearances there because the altitude here was a little bit much. But her wardrobe was still unpacked and still in her dressing room.

So they tell me the next day, “You have to go on, because Ms. Fitzgerald is not going to be here and we need you to sing a couple of songs.” The next night, I’m sitting in her dressing room, looking at all of these gowns, and there was a pair of periwinkle blue, patent leather pumps sitting off to the side.

I put my feet in them. I went onstage, and I sang the three songs in her stead, and the whole time I was looking down at my feet, thinking, “I have on Ella Fitzgerald’s shoes.”

EXPERIENCING BETTY CARTER

I had this band in Los Angeles, and Joey [Heredia, the drummer in the band] called me. He said, “Come down here. You got to see this lady. She’s singing. She has another show. She’s here all week at Hop Sing’s. I got a ticket for you. Just come down.” So I came all the way from Glendale, and there she was.

It was the beginning of the second set, first night. When Betty Carter entered the stage, it was magnificent. When she opened her mouth to sing, it was this extraordinary spirit that poured out onto the stage. There’s this person who had this very, very broad range that had just jumped off the edge and was flying on the stage. She had this relationship with time that left you in kind of suspended animation.

I went to every show, every night after that. It was like a religious experience.

I’ll never forget, I went to the Tower Records, and here’s Bet-Car Records. I’m like, she has her own record label? So I bought a turntable. I had this record player set up with her records all around the speakers, with flowers. It looked like an altar, and I sat in front of that thing and just listened. I couldn’t get enough.

It’s like seeing a glimpse of something that you recognize in your soul, but now you get to see a spark of it, and that spark really changed my life. She gave me this kind of courage that said, “Do the things that are in your heart, your authentic things.” There was nobody like Betty Carter.



◀ Reeves with Dr. Lonnie Smith at the NPR Listening Party for the 2017 NEA Jazz Masters. Photo by NEA staff

▼ Reeves with bassist James Genus at the 2017 NEA Jazz Masters Tribute Concert. Photo by Shannon Finney

GOING WHERE YOU NEED TO GO

The thing that I tell young people is everybody is unique in their approach to the music, and you have to protect that. I tell them to define it, refine it, be able to call on it, be able to stand in it, be able to at any moment jump off the edge with it, because you're so inside of it.

But more than anything is just to stay focused and stay in love with what it is that you are doing. If you love it and you're passionate about it, it's going to take you places—maybe not where this person is going or that person, but where you need to go. 🎷





Choreographer Bebe Miller.

BEBE MILLER

How do I Not Stop Myself?

BY PAULETTE BEETE

All photos by Julieta Cervantes

Bebe Miller started her eponymous dance company in 1985. Since then she has created more than 50 dance works for the company and expanded her choreographic vocabulary to include digital media, text, theater, and other narrative elements. With features at Jacob's Pillow, the Walker Art Center, the Wexner Center for the Arts, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and other national and international venues, Miller has cemented her reputation as one of dance's foremost innovators. Her singular vision has garnered her a U.S. Artists Ford Fellowship, a Doris Duke Artist Award, four NEA Choreographers Fellowships, and many other awards. She also had a long tenure as the Distinguished Professor of Dance at Ohio State University, and most recently, she's expanded her repertoire to include fostering artist-driven convenings around the topic of archiving and documenting dance works.

As Miller notes in her mission statement, "I've always been interested in the space between people, how telling, how specific, and how dynamic it can be." While her work is intimately concerned with the body, she is less concerned with the gender of a particular body than with its "awkward grace." Still, one can't help but look at a work like the NEA-supported *Necessary Beauty*, with its multigenerational cast of female dancers, and not get a powerful sense that by ignoring the limitations of gender, Miller has in fact broken through them. She herself admitted when we spoke with her that her unwillingness to be confined by or even look at the borders of gender and race have made her a role model for a younger generation of dancers and choreographers. In her own voice, here is Miller on the body, her legacy, and why the most important question she asks herself is, "How do I not stop myself?"



▲ Dancers Angie Hauser and Michelle Boulé of the Bebe Miller Company.

BUILDING AN IDENTITY OF HER OWN

I can't take away my femaleness. I'm regarded as such, as part of what it is that I do or who I am. But I feel like that's not the only thing that I am. The same thing with being a black woman. That's just part of this whole structure and identity that I've put together, some of it more handed to me than others. In the dance field, clearly there are more male choreographers, who are getting more money, who are in the public eye. Whether that should be me [in their position] has not occurred to me. That really has not been my interest.

LEARNING TO LET HERSELF SPEAK

I don't feel stopped [as a woman]. I'm more concerned with "How do I not stop myself?" I feel that I've had a pretty successful career. I've been produced and funded in all those ways that are quantifiable. What has *not* happened? I don't know. What I'm left with is: what might I feel about what it is that I *do* say? Am I doing my own truth-telling? Rather than is there somebody else in the way who's stopping me, [I ask]: am I stopping myself?

What I'm looking at is, what is my own perception, over time, of speaking my own truth to power, or even to myself? What has been my journey to doing that? I'm not leaving it for someone else to tell me that that's what I should be doing, or to get in my way. It's more about what have I done? What am I saying? Is this enough? Is this what I have to say? I don't want to be perceived as having been waiting to be allowed to speak. If anything, I feel learning to speak over 30 years of making dances, and figuring out my interests and observing people and relationships, is really what my life's work has been.

THE BODY IN CONTEMPORARY DANCE

For me, and I think a number of choreographers that I know, how we question our physicality is the whole point. Not so much that, "Oh, I should be dainty," or "I should be light." I don't come out of that tradition. I think the contemporary dance tradition is all about self-definition. I feel really fortunate that that is my field, and that I don't need to work against that. The awkwardness of the human body is where I live. I feel that my aesthetic and the questions that I ask of it and of the world have to do with those edges. That said, I think [not] every audience is prepared for [work at those edges]. There has been, of course, a learning curve of exposure and interest, and I feel like there's been an appetite for the edges of our cultures for a long time.

There is a truth to the expectations of people of color being part of that experimental edge. There've been a number of artists in the last 30 years—black women, black men, people of color—who are there, making themselves known, and there's an audience for that. Over time, that audience has grown and been really hungry to be spoken for and to be spoken to.

HER LEGACY AS AN ARTISTIC DIRECTOR AND CHOREOGRAPHER

I think that when I began there was the assumption that relating to the work of Alvin Ailey was the job of every African-American choreographer, male or female. I think that over time that assumption has really given way to much wider and vibrant and various and idiosyncratic ways of being in the world. I think that our culture has kind of caught up with the idea that a stereotype only goes so far. I also want to make clear that I don't see my job as breaking stereotypes. It's more of my job to be

curious and get that in a form that is readable. That's what my choreography is. I think it has helped expand on people's expectations of black women and I'm grateful for that. I'm really proud to be part of a group of women who have done that. I think the byproduct is busting up the stereotype, and the aim is to tell the truth, as best you can. ▲

▼ Six women of all ages danced in Bebe Miller's *Necessary Beauty* for its premiere in 2008 at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio: Yen-Fang Yu, Bebe Miller, Cynthia Oliver, and Kathleen Hermesdorf, standing; and Kristina Isabelle and Angie Hauser, sitting.



National Museum of Women in the Arts
Arts Director Susan Fisher Sterling.
Photo by Michele Mattei



SUSAN FISHER STERLING

Recognizing and Promoting Women Artists

BY REBECCA SUTTON



According to the 2017 report *The Ongoing Gender Gap in Art Museum Directorships* from the Association of Art Museum Directors, women lead nearly 50 percent of art museums in North America. It's a heartening statistic at first glance, but one that Susan Fisher Sterling says belies the progress still to be made for women in the cultural sphere.

She should know. As director of the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) in Washington, DC—a longtime NEA grantee—Sterling has made it her life's work to study and dismantle the challenges women continue to face as both arts leaders and creators. Sterling joined the museum as associate curator in 1988—just a year after NMWA opened—and moved through the institution's ranks as curator of modern and contemporary art, chief curator, and deputy director

before her appointment as director in 2008. Throughout her tenure, the museum has grown its collection to more than 5,000 works, instituted public programs such as the Women, Arts, and Social Change initiative and solidified NMWA's reputation as a trailblazer, thought leader, and fierce advocate for women artists from every genre and era. In her own words, Sterling shares what she's learned from leading the world's only major museum dedicated to women in the arts.

THE BIRTH OF A CALLING

I came to a realization while I was working on my dissertation—which was actually on a male artist—that there were a lot of artists working in contemporary art whom I'd never heard about in my coursework. For example, there was never a class about women artists. My favorite quote is from a class on Abstract Expressionism. I asked my professor if we could talk about women artists, whether it be Joan Mitchell or Helen Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner, Grace Hartigan, etc. And my professor said to me, "Oh, that would be good. We'll use them as comparative material."

That stuck with me. When I finished my dissertation and the museum opened, I thought, "This is something that could make a difference. I want to be part of that." So that's how I started as a curator here.

I feel very lucky to have found a place at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, where I am able to do work on behalf of women artists all the time. That is a unique mission, and in many ways almost a calling at this point. Each day brings fresh challenges, but there also is always the passion for the mission and the sense that it's needed in the field.

PROGRESS MADE, AND PROGRESS THAT REMAINS

For several millennia, if women became artists, they were the exceptions. The social mores of the time, the way in which women were viewed in society, the level of education they were able to receive or lack thereof, their ability to participate in public life—all of that meant that if you were a woman and you wanted to be an artist, you had to be part of an artistic family.

▼ Sterling talks with the artist Judy Chicago at the museum in 2017. Photo by Tony Powell



But we've seen women in the art world making incredible advances. There have been a lot of ways in which women have begun to claim space for themselves and not be the exceptions. We've gone from maybe no women artists on the wall of most museums to somewhere between two and seven percent; certain places are much better. Here in DC, it is wonderful to have so many women museum directors. I hope to see this as a trend across the country in the coming years.

▼ Selections from the National Museum of Women in the Arts collection. Artwork, from left to right: *Jackie (India)* by Andrea Higgins; *Wonderful You* by Jane Hammond; *It Made Sense ... Mostly In Her Mind* by Amy Sherald; *They call me Redbone but I'd rather be Strawberry Shortcake* by Amy Sherald; and *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky* by Frida Kahlo. Photo by Lee Stalworth

While there have been these changes, I think people in the art world want to believe that we're achieving gender parity more quickly than we are. When it comes to the *largest* museums with budgets over \$15 million, women are not a large percentage of the directors. So at the highest power level, women have much less power, around 30 percent of these positions. Generally, women artists are only 27 percent of the solo shows at major museums, and only—at best—30-some-odd percent of representation and shows at galleries. The auction market is

probably the worst: last year, women were maybe five percent of the highest sales of the top hundred. So yes, we have certainly made progress over the last 30 years. But if you think about progress, then you become less vigilant and you soften your condition. You can't rest. If men are being represented as 75 percent of all exhibitions in museums and they're actually 49 percent of the population, there's something that's not quite right there.

LEADING A MUSEUM THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

By its very being, [NMWA] helps to demonstrate that throughout history, being a woman artist has meant breaking boundaries. We're the only museum in the world that commits itself to directly addressing gender imbalance every day by bringing to light these remarkable women artists of the past, and also by promoting the best women artists working today.



At this point, we're really focusing on building a more diverse collection, and showing women of color on a more regular basis. Twenty percent of the total number of women represented in our exhibitions have been women of color. We want our collection to be inclusive, so we're working toward that and seeing how we can achieve that kind of balance as an example to the field.

I'd like to say that the Women's Museum acts as a goad or a prod to other museums about showing women artists. Sometimes they actually call us "a beacon of light and reason" because we try to champion a wide array of artists and give them the exposure they deserve. We take chances and embrace unknown and emerging artists. That's a hard sell for many museums that rely on name recognition. It is hard to get people to show up at the door if they don't know the name of the artist.

But we understand how difficult it is for any artist to have that first museum show. Carrie Mae Weems had her first survey exhibition here in 1993, and that exhibition went to seven venues across the U.S. We had a Brazilian women artists show in the 1990s and into 2001 when Brazilian artists weren't very well known. Arab women in 1994 and in 2014. Aboriginal artists in 2009. So we constantly try to bring new women from other places to the fore. We try to resist what I call "the herd mentality" in the art world. That herd mentality tends to privilege just a few women artists: Louise Bourgeois, Cindy Sherman, Georgia O'Keeffe. There tend to be these women who are constantly being brought up as the exemplars. And then there's a gap. In a time that celebrates famous name artists, we regularly introduce new names to the public and that goes to the core of our mission.



LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

A lot of times I'm asked, "What will happen to the museum when gender parity is reached?" That's been a big topic lately now that women are at the fore. I think if we do our job well and we continue to push the envelope, then there will always be great contemporary women artists to show. There will be an illustrious history that we can tell. So I see longevity for the museum because its mission is clear, and we can participate in the future through our particular lens. 🌱

▲ *Iris, Tulips, Jonquils, and Crocuses* (1969) by Alma Woodsey Thomas. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 50 in. National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay; © Estate of Alma Woodsey Thomas. Photo by Lee Stalstorth



Visual artist and 2014 National Medal of Arts recipient Ann Hamilton, National Museum of Women in the Arts Director Susan Fisher Sterling (who is featured in this issue), and designer Emily Pilloton (who is featured in the online version of this issue) at the museum's Fresh Talk series. Photo by Kevin Allen

In our special online audio features

for the magazine, which you can find at arts.gov, we hold a conversation between former U.S. Poet Laureate and two-time NEA Literature Fellow Rita Dove and the current U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith. We also talk with designer Emily Pilloton about her nonprofit Project H Design, which encourages young female builders and designers through its Girls Garage program.



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