

NEA ARTS

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Up-and-Comers

in the Arts

NEA ARTS

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Everybody has to start somewhere. Before Toni Morrison wrote her way into the Nobel Prize in Literature, before Merce Cunningham indelibly transformed modern dance, before Miles Davis sent jazz careening in a whole new direction, before Meryl Streep became, well, Meryl Streep, each of these iconic artists was an up-and-comer. Each was practicing his or her craft relentlessly—sometimes to the sounds of applause, sometimes in obscurity—hoping to arrive at some version of “having made it.” In this issue we will look at up-and-comers who are establishing themselves in film, dance, design, music, and visual arts.

Join us at arts.gov as well to find web-only stories, such as an Art Works podcast on Youngblood, Ensemble Studio Theatre’s collective of emerging professional playwrights, and a video exploring how some practicing artists got their start. Also, visit our Art Works blog to comment on this issue or to share information on arts in your community.

ABOUT THE COVER

Lead Pencil Studio’s *Non-Sign II*, 2010, is a permanent installation at the U.S.-Canada border in Blaine, Washington, commissioned by the U.S. General Services Administration. The artwork references the freeway signage that is common along interstates. The negative space of the sign is rendered by using a filigree of welded stainless rod; the result frames a view of the open sky. Photo courtesy of Lead Pencil Studio

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Body of Work

A Look at
Choreographer
Aszure Barton

BY REBECCA GROSS



Aszure Barton & Artists performing Barton's *Blue Soup*.

PHOTO BY DON LEE, COURTESY OF THE BANFF CENTRE

Watching the choreography of Aszure Barton is like watching the physical unfurling of the human psyche. Under her direction, every muscle and nerve ending of the dancers seems emotionally charged, transformed from biological entities into agents of humor, torment, lust, and uncertainty. Equal parts explorations of movement and displays of theatricality, Barton's seductive work has earned her glowing accolades and prestigious commissions across the globe. Her own contemporary dance troupe, Aszure Barton & Artists, has solidified the 35-year-old's position as one of the discipline's most enterprising figures.

A native of Alberta, Canada, Barton began tap dancing at age three, launching an unusually active childhood filled with modern dance, ballet, musical theater, synchronized swimming, and competitive high jumping. With her friends, she would invent dance pieces, films, and skits, noting that she began choreographing her friends "when I was a teeny little person."

Although she nurtured dreams of becoming an orthodontist ("I was a fanatic about teeth and mouths," she said), it was the voice she found through choreography that proved irresistible. "I was quite shy," she

said of her childhood. “When it comes to embracing a large group of people verbally, it’s incredibly intimidating. With movement, expression [is] much more comfortable.” She began studying at the National Ballet School in Toronto at age 14, and two years later initiated a choreography workshop with a friend that remains in place at the school. Barton eventually gravitated to modern dance for its “freedom of expression,” though her varied background in dance is something she says cannot be erased from her bones or body.

After following her two older sisters to New York (both now dance with Aszure Barton & Artists), Barton fell into a familiar pattern for Big Apple newcomers, juggling dance with the financial necessity of babysitting and waitressing. Despite this somewhat uncertain footing, she founded Aszure Barton & Artists in 2002, for which she continues to serve as artistic director. “I just decided to do it one day,” she recalled about her decision to start the group. “I had such a strong group of people and dancers that were excited about making something. You go, ‘Okay, let’s do this together. I’ll lead it.’ With so much momentum behind you, how can you not move forward?”

This momentum was brought to the attention of former Mark Morris dancer Ruth Davidson Hahn, and Barton was invited to perform with Hahn’s company in Nebraska in 2003. While at a reception there, she met dance legend Mikhail Baryshnikov, who was performing a piece Hahn had created for him the year prior. “He said, ‘So,’ very nonchalantly, ‘I hear you’re a choreographer. I’d like to see your work! Yeah right!’” she remembered, laughing at the memory. Dismissing the comment as idle party chitchat, she was surprised to find a message from him when she returned to New York. What followed was the type of mentorship that every artist dreams of but only a lucky handful manage to secure. Barton became the first resident artist of the Baryshnikov Arts Center (BAC) in 2005,

and is one of only five to have choreographed original works for BAC.

She has gone on to choreograph for a lengthy list of iconic institutions, including the Martha Graham Dance Company, American Ballet Theatre, Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal, Nederlands Dans Theater, and the National Ballet of Canada. In 2006, Barton tackled the Great White Way when she choreographed the Broadway revival of *The Threepenny Opera*.

Although Barton said that developing trust with new dancers can be challenging, the unique dynamics of each group push Barton’s work in new creative directions. She rarely arrives in the studio with a set plan, instead preferring to use the dancers’ energy as a guide. “We pick up on wherever we are in that moment and build something out of nothing together,” she said. “I don’t have a formula, that’s for sure. The people I work with are so incredibly intelligent and creative themselves that I’m really interested in the collaboration, and facilitating a space where they can bring themselves to the work.”

Choreographing for other companies also influences Barton’s work with her own New York-based company, which operates on a project basis rather than a full-time, daily schedule. “I’ve been very lucky to have the balance of my group and freelancing. We all get to venture out, collect experience, and come back. The moments [together] are really special.” Barton describes her troupe as

her “dream team,” and the company has performed in far-flung international locales. This spring, the company will tour the U.S. and Russia, performing Barton’s original productions of *Busk* and *Blue Soup*. Aszure Barton & Artists also offers residencies, master classes, and workshops, continuing the tradition of support that Barton inherited from Baryshnikov and others.

“Now that I’m in my 30s,” she said, “it’s really important for me to connect to younger dancers. I do not have all of the answers, but I certainly can teach some-



Aszure Barton.

PHOTO BY GRAEME MITCHELL



Aszure Barton & Artists performing Barton's *Busk*.

PHOTO BY DON LEE, COURTESY OF THE BANFF CENTRE

thing and facilitate a space that can support and teach what I know.”

Because her work is so collaborative, Barton resists categorizing her choreographic style, saying that “the only consistent thing in my work is change.” While her stylistic approach may be constantly evolving, Barton’s basic principles remain constant. She tries to honor the people that have trusted her as director, and does what she can to create an “open dialogue” with her dancers. As for her audience, she avoids the impossible task of trying to please everyone, and instead tries to remain “as honest and true to where I am or what I’m feeling intuitively and deeply.” For Barton, communicating this emotional candor establishes an honest connection with spectators, allowing them to fully embrace the world she has created onstage. “I’m trying to return to that ecstasy of pure movement, or something that makes you feel completely moved,” she said. “I want to be able to return to that deep-rooted absolute joy.”

This emphasis on reveling in the naked emotions of a moment informs every aspect of Barton’s life. When asked what else she hopes to accomplish in her already illustrious career, she demurred. “I’m not so goal-oriented in terms of thinking, ‘One day I would love to do this and that.’ I always bring it back to the reality of the present moment. I try to just be where I am and honor where I am.”

There is perhaps no need to target specific professional milestones; her trajectory all but ensures a parade of future achievements and successes. For now, her main focus is simply to stay grounded, and appreciate what she describes as a “truly awesome life.”

“I hope I can continue to be aware and remain sensitive, and continue believing in the power of creativity,” said Barton. “It’s [about] not becoming motivated by ego or taking work that is just for the sake of the prestige. To stay connected to why I do what I do would make me very happy.” ▲



Lead Pencil Studio founders Annie Han and Daniel Mihalyo.

Lead Pencil Studio and the Spaces Within

BY PAULETTE BEETE

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEAD PENCIL STUDIO

◀ *Arrival at 2AM, 2007*, by Lead Pencil Studio, a spatial recreation of the shape of moon rays as they would enter the gallery from two fictional windows at 2 a.m. once per year.

THINGS YOU EXPECT TO SEE AT A BORDER CROSSING: fences, contraband-sniffing dogs, stern warnings. Things you don't expect to see: a 30-foot-tall, 50-foot-wide, woven metal sculpture that looks a lot like a billboard. Except where you expect to see an ad for fast food, there is literally nothing but sky. *Non-Sign II*, commissioned by the federal General Services Administration (GSA), is a sculpture by Seattle-based partners Annie Han and Daniel Mihalyo, collectively known as Lead Pencil Studio. Like much of their work, *Non-Sign II* evidences the art and architecture duo's preoccupation with the framing and partitioning of space in order to direct the viewer to a new way of seeing.

As Mihalyo explained, their pieces are “sort of wedged between architecture—the practical art form—and artwork, which is a less practical form of creativity.” It's this wedge-shaped space that he and Han find irresistible. “Why shouldn't there be a whole realm of architecture that's nonfunctional...and really just meant for experiencing space for its own sake with no practical purpose whatsoever?”

Having received several notable distinctions in recent years—including the 2007/08 Rome Prize for Architecture from the American Academy in Rome—Lead Pencil Studio has already established itself as a significant presence in the field. Yet Han, 43, never expected to grow up to be an artist nor an architect. Korea-born Han explained that only the wealthy or precociously talented received art lessons in her native country. Her horizons changed when she emigrated to the U.S. at age 15. “I was put into eighth grade and right away the teacher picked me out of the class and encouraged me to do artwork,” she recollected. Still, despite her artistic promise, her parents encouraged her to choose a more practical college major. Han enjoyed writing, so journalism seemed a promising career path. But, she acknowledged laughingly, “I practically flunked out of journalism school

the first year.” Impressed by her talent for drawing, a friend suggested Han give architecture a try instead.

Mihalyo's road to architecture started in Seattle, where, he said, “the public school system had really good art teachers all along. I took a lot of art and theater and drafting and design classes.” As an undergrad at Western Washington University, he spent much of his time in the art department under the mentorship of Japanese sculptor Katsumi Murakami. Mihalyo interned with Murakami that summer in Japan on a public art commission. After taking some time off from school, he decided to switch his major to architecture, transferring to the University of Oregon.

It was in the University of Oregon's School of



A detail from *Surface Deposit*, 2010, a site-specific installation for Temple Gallery at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Architecture that Han met Mihalyo, who is three years her junior. She was a teaching assistant for one of his classes, and they started to work on projects together—such as Mihalyo's designs for low-income housing in Eugene, Oregon—falling in love in the process.

The university's architecture school was ideal for a duo also interested in the arts. According to Mihalyo, “It was an unusual program that had a dual emphasis



Stairway, 2003, a sculpture of welded steel, was a site-specific temporary installation in Seattle, Washington, commissioned by the Sand Point Arts & Cultural Exchange.

in the arts and in architecture, so architecture students were encouraged to take their electives in art and vice-versa.”

Not only did their time at the university foster their interest in both modes of working, but they also learned fairly quickly how to collaborate with each other. One of their ground rules is that they start each project with a completely blank slate, rather than with individual sketchbooks of ideas. They also spend a lot of time simply talking about the project. Han explained, “We [ask] what are some words and things that come to our minds, and we write those things down. Then we go through our archives of research we’ve done, photographs we’ve taken...and then we start developing ideas.” Whether working on a tra-

ditional architectural project or a visual arts-based work, Mihalyo and Han are careful to only take those projects by which they are truly inspired, whether that provocation is a particular site or institution or place. “We’re going to have to make sure we’re inspired by it. If we’re not, then I don’t feel like we do our best work.”

Lead Pencil’s thoughtful approach to work is evidenced by the backstory behind *Non-Sign II*. The installation is situated at the U.S.-Canada border crossing near Vancouver. The artists had to consider that the audience would have only a few minutes to take in the sculpture, would be in a moving vehicle as they viewed it, and that it would most likely be seen multiple times by drivers who use the route for commercial reasons. There was also no way to control

“Why shouldn’t there be a whole realm
of architecture that’s nonfunctional...
and really just meant for experiencing space for its
own sake with no practical purpose whatsoever?”

—DANIEL MIHALYO

the weather conditions under which the sculpture would be viewed. In addition to practical concerns, the team wanted to use the opportunity to comment on contemporary highway billboard culture, as well as to highlight commerce as a primary relationship between the U.S. and Canada.

Han noted that one of the project challenges was to get the viewers to take notice of the beautiful tidal landscape surrounding them even as they underwent the scrutiny of a border crossing. “There’s this other world that’s sort of operating that you’re not aware of, and we want to push viewers’ experience back out into the world beyond. That’s part of the reason we decided to create an aperture that refocused on the world that’s behind all this artificial world.”

Mihalyo and Han are both quick to praise former GSA Art in Architecture Director Susan Harrison for creating a supportive work environment around the installation. “It was a real joy to work on that project so we were really happy and proud that our government had set up a system for that to happen and to take place so effortlessly,” enthused Mihalyo.

While Lead Pencil Studio’s visual arts portfolio is impressive, they are also very much practicing architects. In fact, the couple’s own home—a reclaimed vacant lot just outside of downtown Seattle—was featured in contemporary design mag *Dwell*. As Mihalyo described, they typically work on “small commercial projects for clients in the creative arts, including commercial art galleries, record companies, and ad agencies.” Lead Pencil has also worked on residential projects, including mixed-use housing.

The influence of the couple’s architectural practice

on their visual arts work is quite apparent. Not only is there a common vernacular—the skeletal scaffolding of their sculpture *Maryhill Double*, or the window of their sculpture *Adoration Turning Yellow*, for example—but there is a preoccupation with getting the viewer to consider space in a specific way. As Mihalyo expressed, “Almost everything we are trying to address in our art work is coming from our observations and

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***In Between*, 2007, is an installation at the Exploratorium Museum in San Francisco, California.**



PRIORITIES & PERSISTENCE:

A Conversation with Sedrick and Letitia Huckaby

BY CHRISTY CRYTZER PIERCE • ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

Sedrick Huckaby's large-scale paintings draw inspiration from family history and African-American roots. A 2008 Guggenheim Fellow, his works are in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the African American Museum in Dallas, and the Kansas African American Museum.

At his side is photographer Letitia Huckaby, whose multimedia works blend quilting and photography, threading together powerful pieces that pay homage to family. Her work has been shown extensively in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and in New Orleans, Boston, Houston, and Harlem.

We sat down with this husband-and-wife team in their home and studios in Fort Worth, Texas, to discuss what it is like for two thriving artists in their 30s to balance career and family.

NEA: *For both of you, your work explores themes of family and heritage. Can you talk about how this has evolved throughout your careers?*

LETITIA: Shortly before I went to graduate school, my father passed, so I immediately started thinking about family and how I became the person that I am. He was from a small town in Mississippi called Greenwood, which is the fourth-largest producer of cotton in the country. I was a documentary photographer at that time, so I started taking pictures of cotton, cotton fields, and family members.

Through Sedrick's influence, I also started noticing my grandmother's quilts, not just as blankets passed down to me, but as fine art. So I started making quilts out of photographs of cotton and family members and began stitching them together, learning to sew as I went. My work now combines this documentary-style photography and my crafty side. I'm also becoming more sculptural with my work and have recently created dresses and freestanding forms incorporating images.

SEDRICK: My work has always been about African-American culture, family, and heritage. Some of the early works were paintings of different family members, sort of large-scale portraits that aggrandized



*Letitia and The
Rising Sun,*
2006, by Sedrick
Huckaby.

ordinary people and things related to our family. At some point, I decided to single in on one figure, my grandmother, and I did a series of paintings of her and her house called *Big Momma's House*.

In tandem, I began painting still lifes, focusing on quilts. I always painted my grandmother's quilt, but it used to be in the background of the paintings, and then it transitioned and became the subject. I used it as a way to think about family legacy and commenting on the art that she made, like having a visual dialogue with her. And so, I started a series of large-scale paintings of quilts, culminating in an 80-foot-long work I call *A Love Supreme*.

NEA: *Working in such close proximity, how do you influence each other's work?*

SEDRICK: Sometimes just looking at her work gives me ideas. Really, I think what she does is a lot more creative than what I do in that she uses a bigger variety of materials. Her work is more dynamic, be-

cause it's often three-dimensional. Even directly, she influences my work. For example, a piece at the University of Texas-Arlington, where I teach, is a painting of one of her quilts, with imagery, and one of my grandmother's quilts. It's about the generational dialogue.

LETITIA: And he makes me see things in different ways. For example, I might not have ever interpreted my grandmother's quilts as fine art or started exploring my own craftsmanship without his influence.

NEA: *What would you say are the benefits and challenges of being married to another artist?*

LETITIA: Sedrick understands what it takes to get the work done. He helps me watch the kids and picks up the slack when I have something big going on. Also, it's really nice to have someone to bounce ideas off of. You don't always take those ideas, but it's good to have someone to brainstorm with.

Her Quilt, Our Flag, 2001, by Sedrick Huckaby.



The downside is that sometimes it feels like we're two ships passing in the night, especially if we both are working on big projects.

NEA: *Do you ever feel competitive with each other? For example, is it difficult if one succeeds more than the other?*

LETITIA: No, if one of us gets something big, then it's a win for both of us.

SEDRICK: That's right. We push each other to do the best we can do. If she's working toward something, I want to see her really accomplish it. If I know something big is coming up for her, I try to make my schedule flexible to help her out.

LETITIA: Yes, he makes a great studio assistant.

NEA: *Have you worked on any pieces together?*

SEDRICK: Not yet, but we are opening our first joint show at the Irving Arts Center in 2012 called *Me, We*. I'd like for us to do a piece together for that.

NEA: *How do you manage the creative process while raising two children (*Rising Sun, 5, and Halle Lujah, 2*)?*

LETITIA: Timing. Generally, I have a longer picture of the things I'd like to get done, and I weave them in and out of whatever's going on in our day-to-day lives. I take advantage of school or daycare time to get things done. We also have our studios at home, so being on-site makes it much easier to manage.

SEDRICK: I tend to work at night, because that's when everyone is sleeping and there are fewer distractions. This means that during the day I don't need to work as much and can spend more time with them, rather than painting.

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Halle's Dress, 2009, by Letitia Huckaby, featuring a print of the Huckabys' daughter Halle Lujah.

Answering Back

Andrew Okpeaha MacLean Captures Life on the Ice



Director Andrew Okpeaha MacLean, working on his film *On the Ice*. PHOTO COURTESY OF ARTIST

BY PAULETTE BEETE

Situated amidst miles of Arctic tundra and geographically isolated even from other parts of Alaska, the town of Barrow, the northernmost point in the United States, might seem an unlikely place to launch a film career. But that's exactly where filmmaker Andrew Okpeaha MacLean—whose first feature-length film *On the Ice* was recently honored at the Berlin Film Festival—first decided to step behind the camera.

An Iñupiaq Eskimo, MacLean grew up mostly in Barrow and Fairbanks. After earning an undergraduate theater degree at the University of Washington, he decided he wanted to improve his Iñupiaq language skills and headed back to Barrow where a cousin convinced him to start a theater company. “It was a theater dedicated to performing in the Iñupiaq language. We would write plays with the help of elders who spoke the language more fluently and then we’d perform them and have to learn the lines entirely in Iñupiaq,” he explained.



A still from Andrew Okpeaha MacLean’s first feature-length film, *On the Ice*. IMAGE COURTESY OF ANDREW OKPEAHA MACLEAN

While MacLean enjoyed his theater work, he wanted to find a way to reach people beyond the local community. “I [wanted] to do something on a larger scale and reach a wider audience, and films seemed a way to do that. I could be making things that were centered in Barrow or that really spoke to who I was and where I was from, and be able to reach out to people that were beyond the communities where I was living.” Despite having no film experience, he was accepted to New York University on a scholarship, and a filmmaker was born.

All of MacLean’s films to date have been set, at least in part, in Barrow and its surrounding landscape. As is true with all hard-to-reach places, the inhabitants of Alaska’s North Slope remain a mystery to outsiders, and much of their characterization in popular culture is half-truth verging on caricature. MacLean’s filmmaking is a reflection of his desire to let people

know what being an Eskimo is really like. “We’re in a kind of strange position that everybody in the world has heard of Eskimos. Most people have some kind of strange notions—they rely on stereotypes they’ve heard.... We’re like a punch line or something. Nobody really knows us. I want to make art that is reflective of a more genuine aspect of our experience.”

He added that there is an implicit political angle to his filmmaking. “In the Arctic right now, we’ve got this avalanche of information and narrative and stories that just piles into our lives from the dominant Western culture. Movies, television, Internet, Facebook, music... I want to start answering that back. I want to start making people listen to us for a change. I’ve seen a million movies about you guys, now here’s a movie about us that you have to sit and watch.”

MacLean said physical environment looms large as he develops his projects, which isn’t surprising given the dramatic landscapes of his childhood. “I think that environment and place have been important in everything I’ve done as a filmmaker. The Arctic is a unique place, and it really has this feeling of being at the end of the world. I tend to try and exploit that or to use that in the films I make.”

MacLean’s use of landscape to heighten emotion is especially evident in his short film *Sikumi* (2008), which received numerous awards at North American film festivals and is the first film shot entirely in the Iñupiaq language. In the opening scenes, the viewer is confronted with white as far as the eye can see. Sky and land are virtually the same pale, icy shade, and the hunter and his sled dogs seem impossibly small against the vast blank canvas of the hunting ground. A friend of MacLean’s characterized the atmosphere as akin to that of a classic Western, and indeed, despite the film’s short length, the moral battle that plays out between the two main characters has the epic scope of a John Ford vehicle.

“I think part of being out there in this incredibly open, desolate landscape gives the feeling that the characters could get away with anything. We created a kind of moral ambiguity.... You bring your morality with you and you can’t escape it even in places like that,” said MacLean.

That question of morality and how a person’s moral code is affected by place and by culture compelled MacLean to make *On the Ice* (2011), which is in many ways an amplification of *Sikumi*. Like *Sikumi*, *On*





A still from MacLean's short film *Sikumi* (2008).

PHOTO BY CARY FUKUNAGA

the Ice also starts with a murder, but then follows the characters as they return to town and wrestle with the consequences of their actions. It is important to note that *On the Ice* is not just a continuation of or sequel to *Sikumi*: the characters are teens, the action is set in the 21st century, and the characters speak mostly in English. (In *Sikumi*, the characters are much older, and the setting is the mid-20th century.) This was an important shift for MacLean as it allowed him to explore how the younger generations of Iñupiaq live.

"I was interested in what young people are going through up there right now and where they're drawing their identity from," he noted. "They're caught up in this maelstrom of information and story and

everything just getting poured into them from outside. But at the same time, they're very conscious of where they came from and who they are as Iñupiaq. So they're really drawing their identities from two very different places: from traditions that stretch back for hundreds and thousands of years, and then also from contemporary pop culture that reinvents itself every 15 minutes. That kind of violence [in the film] happens all over the world, but I wanted to make the response to it specific. I wanted to look at how these kids would respond to it as somebody who comes from this specific community, from this specific culture."

Although most news stories refer to MacLean as a Native filmmaker, it's a title he wears lightly. "Nobody wants to be ghettoized. Nobody wants to be stuck with a label that limits your possibilities. I look at myself as a Native filmmaker because I'm Native and because I'm a filmmaker and it just makes sense. It's something that I'm proud of." He added, "I think the only potential negative is when people...attribute any sort of success to a kind of affirmative action or this sort of cultural curiosity. Fortunately, we can answer with the films that we make and with how well they actually do and the audiences that they actually reach."

MacLean cautioned, however, that though his culture permeates his work, he doesn't consider himself a cultural preservationist. "I'm too young to be a tradition bearer; that's the job of the elders. The films I make are part of the conversation, but they're not there to preserve something. That would put them in the position of being more or less museum pieces."

Instead, his goal is to use film to be honest about the community of which he's a part—culturally, historically, and environmentally. In fact, MacLean believes that honesty is the primary job of the artist. "The responsibility of the artist is to make work that's real and that's reflective of something that's true. You have to be true to your own vision of the voice you're trying to find. I've seen with other filmmakers...especially in Native communities, that people get defensive or people get upset with artists who bring a negative aspect of the culture to light. I remember when Chris Eyre made *Skins* and people were giving him crap because he was doing a film that referenced alcoholism in the Native community. But to me it seems obvious that that is part of what an artist is supposed to do, to provoke those sorts of things." ▲

A Mysterious Force:
Music Is the Reward
for Grammy-winning
Esperanza Spalding



BY MICHAEL GALLANT

“Something miraculous happens when you really *study* music,” described bassist and singer Esperanza Spalding from her apartment in New York City. “When you take the time to learn techniques through your kinetic memory, and you focus on internalizing what you’re studying, this mysterious force takes over. You put that knowledge together—in real time—in unique, unpredictable ways. It’s different than science, math, and other subjects. It’s unique to music and it exists purely in the moment.”

Focusing her own musical knowledge with passion and determination, the young prodigy has channeled that mysterious, improvisatory force into three critically acclaimed albums as a solo artist as well as numerous performances around the world. Spalding’s virtuosic blend of jazz, world fusion, and singer-songwriter musical forms have earned her a strong underground reputation that is, as of earlier this year, underground no more; her career received a tremendous boost when she was named Best New Artist at the Grammy Awards, notably upsetting better-known acts like rapper Drake and teen idol Justin Bieber.

Though she is a new face to many (though not to Barack Obama—Spalding played at the White House in May 2009 as part of the Evening of Poetry, Music, and Spoken Word), all signs point to Spalding continuing to be a vital creative force for decades to come. In fact, her self-described “near religious commitment” to her art motivates her to constantly improve herself, in the process helping her to pursue her full potential as a musician, spread the gospel of the jazz idiom, and realize a host of dreams that transcend CD sales figures and gold statuettes alike.

As soon as the winner of the 2010 Grammy Award for Best New Artist was announced on national television, the storm of Facebook and Twitter comments began, all variations on a theme—*Who is Esperanza Spalding?* That question was partially answered almost immediately by Spalding herself, who delivered a humble and exuberant acceptance speech that dem-

Bassist/singer/composer Esperanza Spalding.



PHOTO BY KEN GOODMAN

onstrated, above all else, her commitment to her art. “I take this honor to heart so seriously, and I’ll do my damndest to make a whole lot of great music for all of you,” she promised, glowing in front of the camera. “It’s such a blessing and an honor!”

While the announcement had the polarizing effects of rankling tween Bieber loyalists and delighting Spalding’s own dedicated fan base, the artist herself remains impressively grounded in the aftermath of such a noteworthy triumph. “There’s a bigger buzz humming through the media outlets and I’m getting invited to perform at higher profile venues,” she said. “But my life, from the inside out, hasn’t changed—which I like. My day-to-day existence lets me balance business with lots of time to work on music. Hopefully that won’t change too much.”

Even while on tour, Spalding makes sure that such daily routines include hours of scheduled “practice and music study,” though the quixotic creative sparks that become her musical compositions often defy even the most careful planning. “It usually happens in the middle of the night when I need to sleep and have an event the next day,” she admitted, laughing.

Spalding’s ideal day, on or off the road, involves deep immersion into her art. “There are so many aspects of what I’m striving for,” she said. “When it’s a free day, I like to sit with my instrument for six or seven hours. I wake up thinking of music, going from the piano to the bass, working on voice and lyrics. It’s not only my job, but what I like to do for fun in my

spare time. Every little nook and cranny I can juice the music out of, I do.”

Though the Grammy nod may not have changed Spalding’s internal creative life, it has fundamentally altered the way the world sees her, both as an artist and as a commercial entity. “A friend of mine recently told me, ‘Don’t forget that you’ve *made it!*’ In a way, that’s such a testament to our skewed views on artistic versus commercial success. I’m a professional musician and that’s how I earn my living, but the goals I’ve set out for myself literally take decades to even touch. And they all relate to my artistic ideals, the potential that I dream I will have access to.”

Such goals include learning a third instrument, the piano, and further honing her craft as a composer and arranger as well; to that end, Spalding currently studies poetry to help improve her prose and lyric writing. And of course, there are her primary instruments, the upright bass and her singing voice, both of which she continues to practice in pursuit of “freedom and agility” of expression.



PHOTO BY ED SATTERWHITE

Melding the worlds of artistic and commercial innovation, Spalding further aspires to bring the musical tradition she studies to a wider audience. “I want to format elements of the music that I love so deeply in a way that it can be played on modern mainstream radio,” she said. “Jazz is such a powerful art form, particularly the improvisation and communication that happens within it. I have a wish of it becoming acceptable to a wide audience without being watered down—perhaps affecting enrollment rates of young people in music programs in the process, or allowing them just to be exposed to such an enriching art form, even if they’re not all necessarily going to become professional musicians.”

But how can such a thing happen? “The challenge is not ‘Let’s make this more accessible,’” she said. “The challenge is, ‘Let’s *not* change the music and *not* change the players and *not* change the writing, but find a way—whether it’s through the sound of a guitar on a recording or a new type of arrangement, or whatever tools we have access to—to put this on the radio so young people can hear a good song and improvisations by a beautiful band and go, ‘Wow.’ I wish that more kids would be exposed to the arts—and my little piece of that is improvised music.”

As a female upright bass player, Spalding is somewhat of an anomaly in the largely male-dominated jazz world, and she has had to confront her own set of challenges as a result. But she has approached any resulting obstacles with tenacious clarity: “It’s easy to find acceptance in the jazz community! Just be a serious player and work really hard.”

“Well,” she added, laughing. “It’s *simple*. Not easy.”

Though many fans and musicians alike admire her skill and ingenuity, Spalding’s acclaim is not universal. “Some people think I’m a total quack,” she commented wryly. “‘Who is this girl, thinking she’s playing our music?’ I’ve heard that through the grapevine. To me, it comes down to a matter of taste. People thought Ornette Coleman and Thelonious Monk were quacks, but ultimately, their commitment to the music couldn’t be questioned. If you knew them, you know that they worked diligently and loved jazz.

“When I started playing professionally, I didn’t really know how to show my own diligence,” she continued. “I thought I just deserved to be accepted, to sort



PHOTO BY KEN GOODMAN

of get it for free. I used to be upset when people didn't take me seriously. After a little while, though, it occurred to me that I knew how serious I was about this, and that my energy needed to go first into my work. I figured acceptance would follow from there. Lo and behold, that's exactly how it works."

Spalding continues to grow as a musician, and strengthen her bonds within her musical community, both by studying on her own and learning from fellow players. "It's a community you join not because it's some fun club to be in, but because you love the music," she said. "If you're willing to learn from the giants who came before you, be respectful, and actively engage the amazing musicians you come in contact with, acceptance becomes a moot point." ▲

—Michael Gallant is a composer, musician, and writer living in New York. He is the founder and CEO of Gallant Music (gallantmusic.com).

“Jazz is such a powerful art form, particularly the improvisation and communication that happens within it. I have a wish of it becoming acceptable to a wide audience without being watered down...”

—ESPERANZA SPALDING

Lead Pencil Studio

Continued from page 9

our experience about buildings and build culture and cities and that type of thing.” He added that while their fine arts practice borrows the language of architecture, in many ways it’s also about contravening the rigidity of the discipline.

The influence of their sculpture on their architecture may be less explicit, but it’s no less present. Han used the metaphor of drawing with a pencil to try and pin down how their art practice ultimately relates to their architectural one. “If you’re used to drawing perfect lines with a ruler and then someday somebody shows up and says, ‘Okay, don’t use the ruler,’ you have to be really conscious about the thickness of the pencil you’re going to use, how much pressure you’re going

to put on. So it frees you from certain rule-bound disciplines and at the same time makes you very aware of the gestures that you’re making. So for architecture, we try not to fuss over some things. We can step outside of that and think of the bigger picture, which is the beauty of space.”

Ultimately, Lead Pencil Studio is after the same result whether working in fine art or architecture: to draw an emotional response from the viewer. Han said that she likes to ask friends about the “most meaningful spatial experience they can describe.... It takes a while for people to think about that and then it’s sort of the brief experience that you almost can’t describe. It’s like falling in love for the first time. I feel like if we have enough of that [feeling] in a spatial experience, then we would expect our built environment to be better.” ▲



Maryhill Double, 2006, is a site-specific installation along Oregon’s Columbia River Gorge, the exact spatial duplicate of the Maryhill Museum across the river.

Priorities & Persistence

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The Altar Dresser, 2008, by Sedrick Huckaby.

NEA: *Do you feel like you have to sacrifice ambitions of becoming a “major artist” in order to raise a family, or can they go hand-in-hand?*

SEDRIK: I’ve seen artists sacrifice family or feel like they need to make a choice between the two. I know you can have it all. Artists have a tendency to be a little selfish, because art can be all-consuming. But if you can be less selfish, then it’s possible to have everything. In the end, I hope we can be an example that you can have a family with two successful, distinctive artists and it can all work together.

LETITIA: I think it’s easy, though, to get sucked into that “art star” thing. There’s a lot of pressure to keep reaching for a higher level, and sometimes I feel myself getting tempted by that and have to pull back. I have been blessed in that most of my success has come through people seeing the work and talking about it. So, I haven’t had to take on this “try everything, do everything” lifestyle. I think there’s more peace in your spirit when you just accept where you are and move with that.

NEA: *How do you involve your children in what you do professionally?*

LETITIA: The children are curious about our art and they see us create it in our studios. We take them to our shows to see the end result of our work. In fact, prior to Sedrick’s last show, we had one of his paintings hanging in our kitchen. When we took our son to the opening, he was very concerned that they had stolen that painting from our kitchen! They’re making fun connections that way.

SEDRIK: Yes, and of course, anything they draw and do creatively is “all good.” Masterpieces.

NEA: *Do you have any advice for other young artists trying to manage it all?*

SEDRIK: Balance. You know, I think there are two things that are important. One is to get your priorities straight. And then, stay persistent. Things may not come right away because a family sometimes means that it takes more time. But nothing is more important than just keeping with it, and eventually you will see good results.

The reality is that you can make the best plans, and then comes life. Everything can change on a dime, so you also need to learn how to be flexible. You don’t know how or why or in what fashion, but if you stay with it, the world will open up to you on all levels. ▲

—Christy Crytzer Pierce is a writer and publicist in Fort Worth, Texas.



East Feliciana Altarpiece, 2010, by Letitia Huckaby, a pigment print on silk.

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Progressive hip-hop artist Christylez Bacon.

PHOTO BY YACOUBA TANOU

