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Performance Art Festival

October 13, 2016

September 30 -October 1, City Library

The downtown Main Library was a perfect setting this last weekend for the 4th annual Salt Lake City Performance Art Festival. Its twisted and soaring architecture triggers the imagination while open doors invite in colorful character and curiosity alike. It is never unusual to happen upon the unexpected here, and on Friday and Saturday an eclectic collection of artists was set loose to play throughout the building. Brought together by curator Kristina Lenzi, the group included local as well as national and international traveling artists. They entertained, created, questioned, listened, ignored, and provoked. They rode the elevators and hid in air-conditioning vents. They folded laundry and sang songs to the books. Free and open to the public, the event invited and occasionally demanded the attention of those who encountered it. The following are reviews of three very different works from this series.

Homage to the City of Women: Leaves of Gold

Canadian feminist performance artist Tanya Mars' *Homage to the City of Women: Leaves of Gold* opened the Festival on Friday and was the longest running work presented. Wearing an elaborate Middle Ages-style gown and headpiece, Mars occupied a table near the Library's main doors and worked a quiet transformation on a massive pile of old hardcover books over the course of 16 hours. One at a time each book was opened and "illuminated" by Mars as she used a thick gold paint to cover the text inside. In their new form the books were laid out on the floor in long rows, eventually creating a large tableau of shimmering wordless pages. Her method was one of direct and thorough repetition, each book treated exactly the same and each step completed with an air of purposeful precision. Retrieve a book from the pile, crack the spine, paint the right page in a slow swirl, then the left, carefully choose a spot for it to rest. Repeat.

The program notes offered some insight; Mars cites two 15th century masterpieces as influences for her "futuristic illuminated manuscripts": Christine de Pizan's novel *The City of Ladies* and *La Dame à la Licorne* (*The Lady and the Unicorn*). While I am unfamiliar with the first and therefore unable to comment on its significance, I recognized the style of Mars' costume as matching the title figure of *La Dame à la Licorne*, a series of six enormous French tapestries. With this information I couldn't help but draw a parallel between Mars' continuous dedication to one small repeated task and the weaving of one tiny stitch after another by hand to produce those intricately detailed tapestries.

Despite her wardrobe, Mars didn't adopt a special persona for the occasion, allowing for a fluid boundary between audience and artist as she fielded questions from onlookers in a congenial but perfunctory manner. Her casual detachment further suggested to me that the emphasis of this performance piece was not so much on the performative aspect, but rather on highlighting the value of completing a mundane but meaningful task. Instead of trying to entertain, Mars simply offered a window into an ongoing process.

As watching paint dry is a notoriously unexciting experience, most viewers would stop by for just a few moments at a time in between other performances. It felt gratifying to return every so often and see a little bit more of the picture as she filled the hall end to end with golden books. And although I felt that the meanings behind the piece remained somewhat obscure, I appreciated the testament to the slow hard trudge that a creative process can often be.

Hands Up, Don't Shoot!

This electrically famous phrase, continually echoed through the country ever since its birth in the aftermath of the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown, was chosen by Utah artist and UMFA's Director of Education and Engagement Jorge Rojas as title and focal point for his performance piece Friday afternoon. Using this slogan to evoke large and multifaceted contemporary protest movements demanding racial justice and police accountability, Rojas created a schematically simple yet moving piece.

Rather than featuring the artist in contrast to most of the Festival's other performances, Rojas had recruited several volunteers to carry the action. Arranged in a semi-circle, a woman and two children stood, reading simultaneously from lists containing the names of black men and women killed over the past several years in police-related incidents. A man with a set of African hand drums sat behind them and played a cyclical beat. Abruptly one man broke from the crowd shouting, "Hands up don't shoot!" and moved to kneel in the center of the space with arms raised and head bowed. One by one spectators followed his lead, intoning that emblematic call and moving to the center to stand, kneel, and lay down in various poses of surrender. Over the next half hour participants held these poses while the roll call of victims was repeated.

This performance/protest took place in the heavily trafficked main passageway of the Library. It created an arresting scene and generated the biggest crowd of any I viewed during the festival as library visitors were drawn in by its instantly recognizable and timely content. The unyielding wave of unanswered names created an almost meditative atmosphere, and I saw more than a few eyes start to glisten. As the drumbeat sped up, the contrast between a vigorous pounding rhythm that begged to be danced to and the scene of "lifeless" bodies created a sense of immense tension. The drums finally reached a crescendo with few forceful and rapid pops. Silence followed as the crowd of participants dispersed to Library Square to hug one another and discuss the experience.

In his program statement Rojas says the piece will "address long-standing and difficult questions about the value of black and brown lives in the United States." While I wished that more could have been done to evolve the piece and tackle this hefty subject, I could not deny how effectually the performance moved its audience. I did hear Rojas mention at one point that this was only a small section of a larger work so I would be interested in seeing what further development he has to offer.

Under the Floor

A personal favorite for its ingenious use of space, Marilyn Arsem's performance on Saturday was a warm delight. Arsem is a renowned and internationally traveled performance artist hailing from Boston, who also happens to have the most perfectly soothing voice with which to read aloud a bedtime story.

In between each floor of the library is a gap about a couple of feet high. Part of the air-conditioning system, these extra spaces are fully visible from the main walkway of the Urban Room due to the library's glass walls (although they're hardly noticeable if you aren't already looking for them).

Arsem capitalized on this suspended structure by positioning herself in the crawlspace between the second and third floors directly underneath a vent. From the opposing walkway one could gaze across the railing and see her nestled in with a pile of blankets and a pair of reading glasses.

For six hours she read aloud from *The Borrowers*, Mary Norton's classic children's series about a family of miniature people who live under the floorboards and inside the walls of a regular human-sized house. Inside the second floor a few small shaggy rugs were placed around the vent. Anyone who ventured to lie down and press an ear to ground was treated to Arsem's reading, recalling memories of being lulled to sleep by a gentle and loving voice. Friends and strangers young and old curled up close together on the floor for five, ten, thirty minutes at a time. Each one got up and left with a smile.

Emily Snow is a dancer in Salt Lake City and graduate of the Department of Ballet at the University of Utah.