

Performance art

It's a radical way of performing with no limits for artists.
And they've formed a community in Tucson.

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Some are painters, some poets. Some are students, some teachers. One has a degree in comparative literature, one a degree in entomology. Tucson's performance art scene is peopled by an array of residents.

Over the past year or so, we've had an increasing number of opportunities to see them, particularly in the downtown area. The PerformIT group offered hours of performance art and installations at the Historic YWCA on University Boulevard in May. Acclaimed artist Joanna Frueh performed a piece, "Goddess of Roses," at the University of Arizona Museum of Art in late summer. The Splinter Brothers + Sisters Warehouse at 901 N. 13th Ave. hosted two nights of performance during the fall Open Studio tour.

Dinnerware ArtSpace, a sliver of a building at 264 E. Congress St., continues its support of local performers with a monthly performance art series, 7UP. With seven artists given 10 minutes maximum to present their works - the audience can storm the stage if a piece goes over, co-coordinator Denise Uyehara says. 7UP had its first showcase Dec. 3. The next is Monday.

"When people start creating stuff and people can watch it, that's how you create a quote-unquote scene," says Uyehara, an internationally known performance artist who moved to Tucson about 18 months ago. The key is to maintain the rhythm. To that end, the plan is to hold 7UP on the first Monday of every month.

Uyehara notes that many area performance artists met at an August workshop by La Pocha Nostra, a San Francisco-based group directed by Guillermo Gomez-Peña. That's where she met cellist Natalie Brewster Nguyen, who also started 7UP.

"It opened lots of doors, and it formed a community," Jorge L. Porrata, who is pursuing a masters in illustration at UA, says of the workshop hosted by the Museum of Contemporary Art. New to the form of expression in the past couple of years, Porrata, a Cuban native, performed "Coffee Clash" at 7UP with fellow grad student Laura Milkins, a painter.

"It was about the clash of cultures. She was making coffee in a standard American machine, sort of diluted, and I was making espresso, what I'm used to." The two then "did a sort of a dance," which was "a metaphor of how different cultures interact," Porrata says.

The UA School of Fine Arts is producing a number of students connected with the local performance art community, helped along by such names as Frueh. In 2006, the scholar chose to retire in Tucson - her home in the mid-1980s - and teach a performance art class at UA, likely annually. Her "Shaking out the Dead" was an anchor performance of spring's PerformIT.

Frueh stresses the importance of students remaining in town after graduation if Tucson is truly going to build a performance art scene. "In places that aren't Los Angeles or New York, it's a concern," she says, adding that graduate students are instrumental in organizing the events. One of the primary forces behind PerformIT, Milkins says she is committed to remaining in Tucson after graduation. "I'm not going anywhere," Milkins says. "I personally would like to see Tucson as a center for performance art - and radical performance art - like Austin is for music." She is working on another PerformIT for fall 2008.

Last year, Milkins channeled Paris Hilton in a series of shows at Dinnerware in an attempt to "reform" the morally ambiguous heiress. Milkins lost 20 pounds, dyed her brown hair blond, slid into heels and did nice things for people. "If she's going to be an icon, I thought I should reform her. . . . I cooked for people, I drew portraits, listened to people's problems."

Besides retaining such provocateurs and attracting established artists to Tucson, another important element of success is available venues. Depending upon how you define performance art - Frueh asserts that there's no real definition - "there are no parameters," she says - it spills into a number of places. Club Congress hosts both Monolog Cabin, a forum for comedic writers, and Odyssey Storytelling, which finds an assortment of folks using a pre-selected theme as a springboard. (Six Odyssey storytellers will ruminate on apologies Jan. 12.) Slam poets perform their works around town as well, with Bentley's House of Coffee & Tea near UA a frequent haunt.

Painter, sculptor and public artist Simon Donovan got his performative toes wet with Odyssey Storytelling and presented "Four Corners" at the inaugural 7UP. Using video to relay a personal struggle with spirituality and religion, Donovan stood next to the projected image, his back to the audience.

"Performance art is such an odd term because it's pretty broad in terms of what it encompasses. Some are more theatrical and more actorlike, when there's a monologue or a dialogue," Donovan says. "Then there's performance art where you're not speaking at all and not wearing any clothes, rolling around in chocolate."

Inherent to a definition of performance art for longtime Tucson artist Ned Schaper - he's our performance artist with a degree in entomology - is the utilization of all tools available to you. "Why would you not use your body, why would you not use your voice?" Schaper - perhaps better known for his alter ego, Mat Bevel - wonders.

But as Donovan works on his series of videos and Milkins walks across UA in just pasties and a G-string, encouraging students to paint on her (in a September piece unrelated to her Hilton reformation), Schaper admits he's missing out a bit on the recent resurgence. He's been holed up in the Mat Bevel Institute near downtown glued to his computer, learning Flash technology. His dream is BevelTV, where his 48 characters (the Rev. Sermon Clergy, Jesus Chiquita, Dr. Paradox) and hundreds of poems intertwine at the recently re-launched matbevel.com and viewers can investigate each, akin to checking books out of a library, he says.

While Schaper dreams of the Bevel Institute near downtown one day being a headquarters for performance art, with a weekly variety show and a number of different performers, he feels his place is currently on the Internet...