



TBA Notebook: Gary Wiseman's Silent Tea Party

By Inara Verzemnieks, *The Oregonian*

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Brian Lee

Participants in artist Gary Wiseman's Silent Tea Party were treated to a five-course tea and other visual entertainment on the grounds of Reed College on Tuesday evening,

We show up at the tree-lined expanse of grass between Southeast Knapp and Bybee streets on Reed College Place, dressed in blue and clutching sprays of white lilies, according to the instructions on the invitations that arrived in the mail.

"None of us knows what we're doing," a woman with blue eye-shadow says, apologetically, and laughs, as I take a seat on the grass.

We have come for Gary Wiseman's **Silent Tea Party**, the second in a series of three public tea parties -- and interactive performances -- the artist is holding around the city as a part of the Time-Based Art Festival. Each tea party "revisits sites and themes from the artists Portland childhood," according to the program notes, "while creating temporary refuges in our social landscape." The rest is uncertain -- to be discovered in the moment. And it's interesting to see the varying levels of comfort with this uncertainty -- the sense that none of us knows what lies ahead. Some people chat to pass the time. Others sit quietly, studying the canopy of trees or each other.

Gradually, more and more tea party-participants find their way to the grassy median, where the spicy scent of lilies is now thick in the air: A woman carrying two dogs. A man in a blue wig, who says, "Is this the blue tea party or are you just odd people sitting here?" A few people nod. "Are we supposed to be silent already?" he wonders aloud.

Does anyone notice the people in the house across the street, studying the scene through the front window?

Finally, a car pulls up and out jump organizers, who explain that we will walk in a procession to Reed College, where the tea party will take place on the west side of the front lawn. They snap blue glowing bracelets on our wrists, ask of us each to pose for pictures. They also pass out little white cards asking us to observe silence for the duration of the event -- although, they note, non-verbal communication is encouraged.

And then, our hushed walk begins. A little boy with a red wagon waves at our procession. Traffic stops. We cross the long, ankle-length grass of the college lawn and make our way to the tea party site: a large area cordoned-off with white barriers, where a long table has been set with unlit candles and place cards for 32 guests. A large white balloon is tethered not far away. Women in blue dresses gather our lilies from us, returning a short while later with vases overflowing. Off to one side, a woman in a long white dress swings on a swing set. The creak of it is almost deafening above our silence.

The artist emerges, his face painted blue. He walks to the head of the table and sets down a battered metal lunchbox. He watches as the woman gets off the swing and releases a rope, sending the balloon farther into the sky but it remains tethered. Then she drifts away. Slowly, Wiseman walks over to the balloon, and releases it entirely. We watch it grow smaller and smaller in the sky, as he cues up Neil Young over the loudspeakers: "My life is changing in so many ways, I don't know who to trust anymore..."



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Eleanor Williams walks silently toward Reed College campus where she and 32 other participants will be part of artist Gary Wiseman's Silent Tea Party.

The rest of the night is what we make it, and so much emerges in the silence. A photograph of a young girl is passed around. The women in blue dresses come by with plates of blue food -- mixed blue salad with blueberry vinaigrette, blueberry creme fraiche over figs and plums, blueberry bubble tea, squid ink pasta -- and with bottles of bubbles. Some people blow endless streams of iridescent bubbles into the sky. Others try to catch them. There are tea-party rowdies, who use the votives on the table for impromptu games of checkers, who use their straws like blow darts to send the tapioca pearls from their bubble tea hurtling across the grass. They spend the evening dissolving into fits of laughter. Our quiet only amplifies the sound. As well as the sound of each breath, each bite.



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The silent tea party offered moments of quiet reflection and remembrance.

Farther down the table, near where Wiseman sits, the silence carries an air of sweetness and sadness. A group, clearly a family, sits at that end of the table. And at one point near the end of the night -- not long after Wiseman has wiped off his blue face with a white cloth -- he approaches a woman there, offers his hand, and walks her to the swings. Together, they swing in silence for several minutes, climbing higher and higher. The rowdies laugh and snort. A woman passes me one of the autograph books that the artist has created for the event, and motions that she would like to sign mine, too. Thanks for being here! she writes. The woman with the dogs feeds them the scraps off her plate. A few people drift over to a spot on the grass where a couple offers a traditional Japanese tea ceremony.

Does it matter in the end whether anyone knows that the house we gathered in front of was the home of a childhood friend of Wiseman's who died? Or that it was the friend's mother who Wiseman invited to the

swings? That each detail of the night, down to the distance between the stakes marking the plot of grass we shared for the night, was designed in relation to some memory. Does it change the experience in any way?

I don't think so. I think if the night proved anything, its how much we say without ever speaking. Later, when I slept, I dreamt of people I loved with an aching vividness.

The third tea party -- "For Possibilit(ea)y" -- takes place at 3 p.m. Saturday at Rimsky Korsakoffee House, 707 SE 12th; \$3. Bring: Bees. Wear red.

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