

Where EAST meets the Northwest



MULTIPLE MEDIUMS. Varinthorn Christopher is a local artist in Portland State University's Art and Social Practice MFA program. She contributed several works to this year's Time-Based Art Festival. *Making Sense of Suffering* is a video project exploring research about culturally specific healing practices. (Photo courtesy of the artist)

From *The Asian Reporter*, V18, #38 (September 23, 2008), page 13.

PICA's Time-Based Art fest continues to push boundaries

By Toni Tabora-Roberts

The Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA) is a gem among the city's wide array of arts presenters. Founded in 1995, its goal is to offer contemporary works by emerging and established artists from around the world, propelling audiences to discover new ways of looking at and experiencing art. Their celebrated Time-Based Art Festival (TBA) has become an annual ritual for the city's art fanatics, bringing in renowned guest curators who put forth ever-evolving visions of what "time-based art" can encompass.

Festival roundup

This year's fest, which ran September 4 through 14, was the third and final installment of guest artistic director Mark Russell's turn at the helm. In his opening letter about TBA in the distinctive catalog (a small, colorful, thick booklet that was easily recognizable around town in the hands of feverish

... festival goers), Russell describes the event with words like awkward, bawdy, nasty, beautiful, bittersweet, and funny. It was all those things and much more.

The festival was a citywide event, with art happenings at more traditional venues such as the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, Imago Theatre, and Portland State University's (PSU) Lincoln Hall as well as other less-customary art sites such as Jamison Square, Someday Lounge, Living Room Theaters, the Portland Farmers Market, and even on the air at KBOO Community Radio. TBA's unique anchor venue this year was the Leftbank Project, a unique, sustainable commercial space on the east side of the Broadway Bridge. Boora Architects partnered with the organization to design THE WORKS at the Leftbank Project. The facility served as a hub of accessible visual art, performance, and a festival community gathering space complete with a café and beer garden.

TBA brought together a wide swath of art from performance to visual, from music to movement, from one-man shows to audience participation happenings, from film to dance, and many other less definable works. Artists journeyed from as far away as Israel and Taiwan (via New York), Thailand, France, Portugal, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis; from closer places such as Boise and San Diego; and, of course, many participants were from hometown Portland.

Some of the more legendary acts included the opening performance of the New York band Antony and the Johnsons in concert with the Oregon Symphony and the site-specific landscape, music, and movement collaboration of Third Angle New Music Ensemble with some of Portland's most admired choreographers, headed by the venerable Anna Halperin.

Other artists with plenty of buzz were Reggie Watts, Sojourn Theatre, Daniel Beaty, Mike Daisey, and Superamas. It seemed art was happening all day and all night for 10 days.

Inspired Asians

Two groups that found inspiration from international and Asian themes were LeeSaar The Company and local artist Varinthorn Christopher as part of a program called *Neighborhood Projects* from PSU's exceptional Art and Social Practice MFA program.

LeeSaar presented an intriguing performance piece that included exquisite movement sections interspersed with hokey lip-synched musical numbers. Titled *Geisha*, company founders Lee Sher and Saar Harari, originally from Israel, were inspired when they found Jye-Hwei Lin, a dancer originally from Taiwan. A few years back, LeeSaar had a short piece also titled *Geisha*. "It was, I think, the beginning of *Geisha*. It was the seed," remembers Sher.

Upon meeting Lin, they reconnected with some of those ideas.

A striking visual display, the piece began with Lin's powerful dance — clad in just jeans (yes, she was topless). The audience seemed breathless, taking it all in, trying to get comfortable with the seeming vulnerability of a dancer on stage exposed in this way. Lin's performance eventually dispelled that sense of vulnerability, creating a complex rendering of the geisha theme. In between Lin's movements, Sher took the stage, channelling the likes of Céline Dion and Barbra Streisand as a diva character lip-synching her own singing. Saar, similarly clad in jeans, eventually joined Lin in an interesting duet that touched on gender, sensuality, and brutality. Each of the characters appeared to represent an interpretation of the mystique and performance nature of the geisha.

On the other end of the spectrum, Portland-based artist Varinthorn Christopher, originally from Thailand, explored the idea of art as community engagement. She presented three different projects for TBA, all of which made a tangible effort to connect people to larger ideas of changing our community for the better.

Making Sense of Suffering is a video project that sought to bring together cross-cultural ideas of how to deal with suffering, acknowledging that Western psychology does not necessarily work well for all communities. The film presents investigations from researchers in India, Iran, and the U.S. as well as her own observations of practices in Thailand.

Christopher's other pieces allowed her to interact in the community, empowering citizens to challenge local businesses about what they are selling as food. In *Seitanic Petition* she went to the Portland Farmers Market with free Tofurky in hand to collect signatures to ask local mini-mart stores to carry healthier food options. The *Convenience Truth* was more of a guerilla project in which she created warning labels for certain foods containing carcinogenic ingredients and snuck them onto actual products in local grocery stores.

To learn more about TBA, visit <www.pica.org/tba>.