

deconform

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THE SPECTACLE



featured artists

[Kiki Blood, Ben Fain, Yusef M. Sharif, Constance Thalken]
by Misty Harper

Note: The following questions were posed to local visual artists Kiki Blood, Ben Fain and Constance Thalken and to local jazz saxophonist/street musician, Yusef M. Sharif. Because Sharif's interview was held in person and without a recording device, we were able to capture only excerpts of his conversation, and some may not be completely verbatim.

DCON: If you had no limits of time or resources, and were employed to distract your audience from mainstream culture, what would you do?

BLOOD: I'd take people's hands and bring them to my side of reality...share my freedom, fearlessness, and vulnerabilities with society. The debate over beauty is in motion and to me, in my deepest studies; fear is the great obstacle. I like playing with this, teasing fear, riding the line of my strengths and weaknesses...This line is what I'd like to share with others, to reflect what is inherent in us all, pure human everything.

FAIN: I would put on my own Super Bowl. I don't maintain a position outside of mainstream culture, I'd rather add to it, not distract.

DCON: Do you feel that some powers that be consider art to be a threat to social norms?

BLOOD: God says anything goes. Government says make fun of me, mock me, challenge me, please set me free!

FAIN: There's a reason Giuliani cut off funding to the Brooklyn Museum and closed the train stop outside of it. For one he's a petty dictator but he also saw it as a threat. Censorship works on all levels. Most of what's considered artistic activity is usually a statement of difference to begin with; an example of an individual action, which is in opposition to "the rest"—an individual identity apart from a national one. For example, the Chinese thought the protesters carrying the paper mache statue of liberty in Tiananmen Square were dangerous enough to shoot at them first. I've heard Hitler actually foamed at the mouth when speaking about modern art. But I think

the question is not— "can art have agency?" Rather, "can art provide agency?" which I absolutely think it can. I've always felt that artists had an obligation to engage society. I'm not really interested in putting on my own parade in Siberia for all the sled dogs, unless it comes back to civilization and does something useful.

SHARIF: Of course. Anything that is going to have an impact on people's minds [will be considered a threat by some].

THALKEN: Yes, of course. Visual imagery has a profound effect on the human psyche. And, depending on your politics, it can create quite a societal disruption.

DCON: Do you think that your art presents any kind of threat to an established power?

BLOOD: I am finding that my nudity is terribly uncomfortable for the Southern crowd... It seems as I disrobe I am creating humiliation and embarrassment for some, even exploitation of the feminine. For me, I'm owning my own body, choosing to use it as an object, as a canvas for raw emotion and power ...The work I do seems more about self-governing and less about spectacle. I think that the cost

of non-limitation is high but something that takes me to truth. Art is not for soothing; it is for everything.

FAIN: I send everything priority through the parade. Parades are inherently adaptive, put anything on a float, a man doing his taxes, a plate of eggs and suddenly it's an alternative to Atlantic Station. In a sense though, protest today, especially in the U.S., is framed without an inside or outside; everything is included in the machinery of culture, so it becomes an image of rebellion rather than rebellion itself. And if everything gets folded into its machinery and enters into its structure, then whatever you do gets entered into it. This is precisely why it's the interface that interests me most because it incorporates itself into the model.

THALKEN: If my work poses any threats for viewers, I think it is linked to an emotional or psychological intimacy they may find in the work – probably not from anything overtly political per se. Intimacy can create a level of discomfort or unease for some – be that it comes from watching a nude middle-aged figure turning cartwheels in a shed, like in my recent installation "Nothing Can Return," or from looking at a man lying in bed with his body entwined around his pet lion ("Fragments of An Elegy").

DCON: What keeps you from being productive? What allows you to be productive?

BLOOD: Earning money is time and energy consumption. It would be nice to have the resources to play and share at will. I am grateful for what I have and enjoy creating something from nothing and earning the right to have



photo courtesy - Ben Fain



photo courtesy - Kiki Blood

materialized this of my own free will.

FAIN: P.T. Barnum was a prohibitionist and spent a lot of time lecturing about the evils of alcohol, but he also invented the baby beauty contest. I'm somewhere in between.

SHARIF: The longevity of me being able to play in the clubs...often times is short-lived. People will not patronize the places where quality music is being played, or they will relegate you to background music; [in which case] your music doesn't have any meaning.

THALKEN: Not having a good block of uninterrupted time. A good block of uninterrupted time.

DCON: Do you have a political agenda? If not, what do you wish to accomplish in your work?

BLOOD: Yes, I often have an agenda. It is hard not to. The agenda doesn't have to have a

FAIN: My political agenda is to get people to read Eric Amling poems and look at Lisa Kemp's paintings. I would also ask every artist in Atlanta to please stop pouring a half-inch of resin on top of all their paintings, (except J. Ivsevich).

SHARIF: I play to try to keep people sane from all the garbage they are hearing everyday. I play music they have forgotten because of the trash. Quality music is hurting nowadays. The bar has been lowered so much. Music is attached to the quality of life. [Today] people are more in a state of being manipulated. This [mainstream] music is mind control [made to have people] moving like cattle... [Many people today] only empathize when it's being generated by foundations. Music is underappreciated today. People are under a lot of oppressive things. In order to accept those things they have to desensitize. They have been in

cruise ships. The point is you could make the worlds largest watercolor, one that you could see from space but who cares? It's not just scale for scale's sake. In one sense the spectacle alienates, in another it's a unifying experience, which I think can be positive. People watched "Gemini's Brine" with their own bodies, that's important to me.

THALKEN: Matthew Barney

DCON: What project did you feel the most inspired or charged while working on? How would you describe that project or piece?

FAIN: Gemini's Brine was the scariest thing I have ever done. Leading up to the event all I wanted to do was get on a train and leave town. I worked on it for two years, it was over in forty minutes, and depending on your sight-line it was either a bus accident with great feng shui or ten clowns in a field doing handstands. I also saw the whole thing through the inside of a lamp shade so I might not be the best person to ask, but for me the set up was demobilizing, the generosity of everybody helping to make it happen, giving what they had to it, it broke me into pieces. That said, it was too chaotic, too unorganized, and too ambitious, but I completely agree with Brian Parks that this is the beauty of public performance, the element of risk. This is the compass guiding my next parade, set for Atlanta in 2009, it will be an allegory of chance.

THALKEN: [One] project was a large body of photographic work that I developed over a five year period entitled "Fragments of An Elegy." This work revolved around the event of the alligator harvest season in the southeastern coastal regions of Florida and Louisiana. I traveled freely in a VW camper van in the area, returning each year to the marshlands dotted with tiny villages and indistinct crossroads. I established several long term relationships with people and often stayed with them in their homes while I worked. The project challenged my philosophical concerns regarding animals and required me to come to terms with issues much bigger than myself. I was always on edge because the subject matter was so powerful.

"Fragments of An Elegy" examines the border between human and animal and the idea of common drives and emotions, such as fear, a need for companionship, the instinctual fight for survival and the shared destiny of death. Entwined within the work was the notion of the immense power of the life force and the paradoxical frailty of its physical embodiment.



photo courtesy - Constance Thalken

complete form, but I want to lift the restraints of a suffering society or at least reflect it. I think about women who turn the light out to have sex because they fear their vulnerabilities so much, or men who go to strip clubs to see pussy because their wives won't give it, and the increasing number of molestation cases and the number of domestic violence murders and the dominance of authority over the resources for change and the power of these suffering souls making decisions for someone like me and I say... "Wait a minute... just watch me perform what you've forgotten in yourself, or are you so goddamn afraid of letting the lines bleed beyond your perfect cookie cutter shape. I will set you free if you'd only open your eyes for a split second. Come to my chamber Jesus and fuck me I am Mary Magdalene, here to refuel you for your martyrdom of society."

all respects desensitized. I can see [a change in] their charitable attitude. [Some musicians are] not letting it come from the heart. I let it come from the heart.

You have to study art. Romare Bearden and Michelangelo, they didn't waste no time painting Mickey Mouse.

DCON: What is an important question to ask an artist today?

BLOOD: Will you come out and play?

FAIN: What's worth doing?

DCON: In terms of spectacle, whose work first comes to mind?

BLOOD: Dali, G G Allin, Viennese Actionism (Gunter Brus).

FAIN: Busby Berkeley, The Rose Parade in Pasadena, the bullshit of Bollywood, Dubai,