

smART Magazine

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the New York Issue



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A Word from the Editor

New York, New York

—the city that never sleeps is waking up to a bright post-pandemic morning in the arts, and the Immersive Van Gogh Exhibit is poised at the helm of that comeback. Issue No.5 of smART Magazine is a celebration of the special kind of energy that animates New York. A celebration of its people, who are “the greatest common denominator,” as Creative Director David Korins put it when he joined us for an interview from the back of an Uber, in between errands, on a busy May day.

It is a celebration of the artists leading this comeback with a uniquely resilient creative spirit. The first time I visited the city, about a decade ago, I met an actor whose words beautifully captured this resilient spirit, he said, “If I’m going to be hungry, then I want to be hungry in New York.” And finally, this issue is a celebration of the latest expansion of the Immersive Van Gogh Exhibit, and its much anticipated arrival at the city’s Lower East Side on June 4th.

Our collection of equally inspiring and revealing conversations with artists and arts-administrators continues this issue with a roster that includes actor-director Jay Baruchel; local painter Kristy Gordon; veteran filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson; and jazz pianist Emmet Cohen. We also welcome a selection of organizations that make the magic happen in NY and on both sides of the border, including bluemouth inc., a NY-based performance collective; and Boulevard Arts, an immersive art-and-culture technology company launching a new app for Lighthouse Immersive.

Keeping up with Lighthouse Immersive’s activities elsewhere in North America, we also welcome artists such as San Francisco Resident Artist Jun Yang; British-Canadian performer Magical Bones; Canadian filmmaker Billie Mintz; and Boston-based director, Igor Golyak.

smART Magazine continues with the belief that artists, and artworkers, should be presented in an artistically inspiring way. That is the spirit behind the work which our writers and illustrators have compiled for Issue No.5. So we hope you’ll accept our invitations to join in on these incredible conversations, and let us know how they inspired your search for artistic experiences now and in the future.

From my desk to yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Zarathus-Cook". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Michael Zarathus-Cook
Chief Editor and Visual Designer
May 2021

masthead

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David Korins:
Immersive Van Gogh
in NYC by John Nyman



David Korins
by Kalya Ramu

“Every single kind of person lives and breathes in New York City, so you’re not talking down one of these siloed-off communities. You’re talking to the greatest common denominator.”

Even over a Zoom call, our interview with *Hamilton* Set Designer and *Immersive Van Gogh New York* Creative Director David Korins oozed with the energy and tempo of NYC. Joining us from the back seat of an Uber, David spoke with passion and panache about the New York art scene, working with Lin-Manuel Miranda, the secret subconscious powers of design, and his city's notorious beef with LA. Serendipitously, his shameless praise of making art for the common denominator was even punctuated by an errant car horn.

Nonetheless, David's razor-sharp wit and astounding breadth of insight are more than matched by the inspiring generosity behind his work as an artist and designer. On the one hand, his approach is steeped in humility toward the work of his collaborators—including *Immersive Van Gogh* Creator Massimiliano Siccardi and, in a sense, Van Gogh himself—along with a profound desire to carry that work to its greatest heights of innovation and exposure. On the other, he is also keenly attentive to the hopes and fears of New Yorkers as they pursue a slow exit from the devastation of COVID-19. Taken together, David's words offer a simultaneously practical and idealistic approach to defining post-pandemic artistic experience—an offering all the more valuable in that it comes from a global epicentre of both the tragedies of this past year and the profound creativity through which we will survive it.

“ Really wrestling with what post-pandemic experience is, is very specific to what New York is. If it can work in New York, it'll work anywhere, because we really went through it. ”

How do you articulate your role as Creative Director for *Immersive Van Gogh*?

Compared to set design, being a Creative Director and designer is a bigger bite of the apple. There is no “director” of the show per se. I believe Massimiliano Siccardi's title is Artistic Director: he's created this thing, but I'm basically taking the thing and pouring gasoline all over it, to fan the flames. I think that's what he did to *Van Gogh's* work. He took *Van Gogh's* work and interpreted it in an artistic way, and I'm taking his interpretation of *Van Gogh's* work and filtering the entire thing through my own artistic sensibility—and creating something brand new as a result.

Massimiliano is sort of the Steven Spielberg of immersive theatre and immersive video design. For *Immersive Van Gogh*, I'm responsible for taking his film and then sculpting—beginning, middle, and end—the journey of the consumer or visitor. I control where they get their tickets, how they get their tickets, how they queue up in line, and everything they interact with all the way through the merch store, the lobby, and then all the way back out. So, it's much more holistic than the set designer would be on a piece of theatre.

In addition to making all new, cool, interesting, dynamic sculptures and ways in which Massimiliano's work will be enjoyed—things like viewing platforms and sculptures that refract light in new and interesting ways, that people can interact with and move around—I'm also creating a bunch of original pieces of IP that will help you learn more about the man, the artist, the brand, etc. We're making installations in and amongst the merch store and lobby that I think will help make audiences' appreciation and knowledge of the artist much deeper and richer.

As a creative in the city, what's your sense of the current artistic atmosphere?

I think that right now, we're all cautiously optimistic. We're all incredibly excited and energized about being able to open in the arts in general. But I say "cautiously optimistic" because we're also at a place we have never been in the history of live events: every single project is starting from zero and ramping up at the same time. So, I think there's a feeling of deep and beautifully earned community, because we've all been through something profound together. There's also hope that this is going to stick, that things are going to open and stay open. And there's hope that these shows and voices will be amplified, find their own individual audiences, and maintain. Because every single project is basically vying against every other project, and that's a really strange and interesting place to be.

I think 2021 is going to remain hopeful and wonderful, and that we're going to see revelatory returns back to live events. Our production of *Immersive Van Gogh* is in a way the first and largest thing back in New York City. There have been little pockets and pop-ups, but our experience is, I think, one of the biggest live events that will open since the pandemic. In a way, this is the biggest, brightest beacon of hope we have.

I also think it is smartly created so that you can walk through this experience with your hands in your pockets. You don't have a VR headset on your head, you don't have to be shoulder-to-shoulder with people. So, I think it's the perfect time, and the perfect experience.

One of the reasons I love *Immersive Van Gogh* so much is that there are so many on-ramps to people's attachment to Van Gogh. If you're a high art lover, then obviously we're talking about one of the top five artists in the world. If you aren't knowledgeable about art at all, these are still some beautiful, amazing, dynamic, incredible pictures. If you're a music lover, or an art lover, or you just want a really cool experience, you can see and reinvest in these works in a way that you never have before.

The other part of it is this: Van Gogh is not a well-understood entity—as a man, as an artist, and as a brand. This resonates with the past year of people being stuck indoors, wrestling with depression and loneliness, etc. In a way, there is no more revelatory return to the limelight than someone really having their moment after all this isolation.

“ I think there's a feeling of deep and beautifully earned community, because we've all been through something profound together. ”

What do you find special about how audiences engage with visual art in New York specifically, and how have you incorporated this insight into your work on both *Hamilton* and *Immersive Van Gogh*?

I think New Yorkers are among the most intelligent, worldly, and weathered audiences in the world. As a group, we're really well informed, well travelled, and well immersed in culture. I also think people are even smarter in a group, so we never try to dumb something down. But also, every single kind of person lives and breathes in New York City, so you're not talking down one of these siloed-off communities. You're talking to the greatest common denominator. I think those two things are a really interesting dichotomy: we have to balance needing to be something for everyone, and also something for very elite thinkers.

The thing about *Hamilton* is that I wasn't truly in charge of how the show would be presented. Lin wrote a 27,000-word, 51-song masterpiece that spanned over the course of 30 years of American history, and my job was to figure out how to allow the audience to see and hear it—which was not easy! Now it feels inevitable, but it wasn't that easy when we first did it. We didn't really make it for a New York audience specifically, we just made it for an audience. So, that was about wrestling a brand new work down to the ground.

I think New Yorkers are concerned about COVID, they're concerned about culture, and they're concerned about new and interesting innovation. With *Immersive Van Gogh*, we've made something where the high-touch surfaces are incredibly clean and very well maintained, the art is presented in new and super-dynamic ways, and the space is 70,000 square feet. This is intentional, both so you can see and understand the profundity of the size and scale of the work, and also so you can stay safe. And that feels really specific to New York.



I was in LA recently, and while LA is obviously concerned about COVID, no two pandemics are created equally. In New York we lost our sense of humour a little bit, because when things got really bad they were building morgues in Central Park. In LA when things got really bad people were still kind of separate, and there's just much more space there. So, really wrestling with what post-pandemic experience is, is very specific to what New York is. If it can work in New York, it'll work anywhere, because we really went through it.

By the way, I used to have real beef between New York and LA. I was bicoastal for a long time. But I think I can solve the beef once and for all. If you compare the two cities, they will both lose. You can't compare them. It's not even apples to oranges; it's like apples to pontoon boats. That said, if you take the best of both cities, they both win with flying colours. It's not to say that LA didn't go through a horrible pandemic, because the numbers of LA's pandemic were worse than New York's at both of their peaks. But there's a different space issue. I trade in the currency of experiences through space, and in New York, we don't have the luxury of jamming people together in a way that's comfortable. As far as I'm concerned, there is no rivalry between New York and LA, because they're both amazing cities. Still, how you present an experience to people who have just gone through and endured something like this pandemic needs to be accounted for.

“ Massimiliano Siccardi created this thing, but I'm basically taking the thing and pouring gasoline all over it. He took Van Gogh's work and interpreted it in an artistic way, and I'm taking his interpretation of Van Gogh's work and filtering the entire thing through my own artistic sensibility—and creating something brand new as a result. ”

What is one book that changed how you think about design?

There's a book that has nothing to do with art at all: it's called *Blind Spot*, by Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald. It's actually about implicit biases. I became obsessed with implicit bias about six years ago when I heard there was something called an IAT test in which you could measure people's biases, whether they had to do with race, religion, sexual orientation, preferences, etc. I just thought: if you can measure it, you can probably solve it. If you can scientifically measure something, you can probably scientifically fix it.

I got really interested in this book specifically because of what we do as designers. We live in a world where there are architectural standards, so that doorknobs are always at the same height, light switches are at the same height, toilet bowls are at the same height, etc., so we don't hurt ourselves. But with design, you can take implicit bias, what the mind does, and someone's cultural impulses, and tweak them to get the right design effect. If you can do that, it's very powerful.

What we do as designers is kind of subconsciously push people into thinking certain things. For example, we want you to feel like it's a wide open space, or we want you to feel like it's constricted, or we want you to feel smarter, or we want you to like this character, etc. *Blind Spot* helped me understand how people consciously and subconsciously think about the world around them, what we project onto things, and how we endow things with meaning—and it totally blew my mind.

Jay Baruchel: *all-Canadian Charmer*

by Madeleine Kane



Jay Baruchel
by Kalya Ramu

Sifting through any genre-defining comedy of the last decade, you'd almost certainly find the scruffy yet relaxed charismatic magnet personified by the all-Canadian charmer, Jay Baruchel. As a familiar onscreen staple, with a career spanning over two decades, Baruchel's performances range from box-office hits to raucous blockbuster comedies, to acclaimed and poignant dramas.

In recent years, Baruchel has delved fully into his life behind the camera as a writer and director. His author's debut, *Born Into It: A Fan's Life*, a memoir of lifelong devotion to the Montreal Canadiens, was published in 2018.

In 2020, amidst the chaotic reshuffling of pandemic cinema, Baruchel released his directorial debut *Random Acts of Violence*, for which he also co-wrote the screenplay. A savory summer-road slasher inspired by brusque graphic-novel gore, *Random Acts* pumped fresh blood into the Canadian horror scene, and solidified Baruchel as a no-holds-barred director with even more up his sleeve.

Inspired by our Proust Questionnaire, Jay Baruchel joins us for a special Q&A and unveils the secret facets of what motivates his multi-talented creative mind, and the private inspiration behind an enduring career.

1.
What is your idea
of perfect
happiness?

*Reading books on
the porch with
nowhere to be.*

6.
What do you
dislike most about
your appearance?

My smile.

11.
Historical figure
you most identify
with?

*Flight Lieutenant
George Beurling.*

2.
Your greatest fear?

Dying young.

7.
Love of your life?

My wife.

12.
Your real life
heroes?

*My mother, my wife,
my sister.*

3.
The trait you most
deplore in
yourself?

Bad temper.

8.
Favorite
occupation?

Directing.

13.
What is it that you
most dislike?

Inequity.

4.
Trait you most
deplore in others?

*Feeling sorry for
yourself.*

9.
Your chief
characteristic?

*Propensity for
daydreaming.*

14.
Your greatest
regret?

Not joining the army.

5.
What do you
consider the most
overrated virtue?

*Being true to
one's self.*

10.
What do you most
value in your
friends?

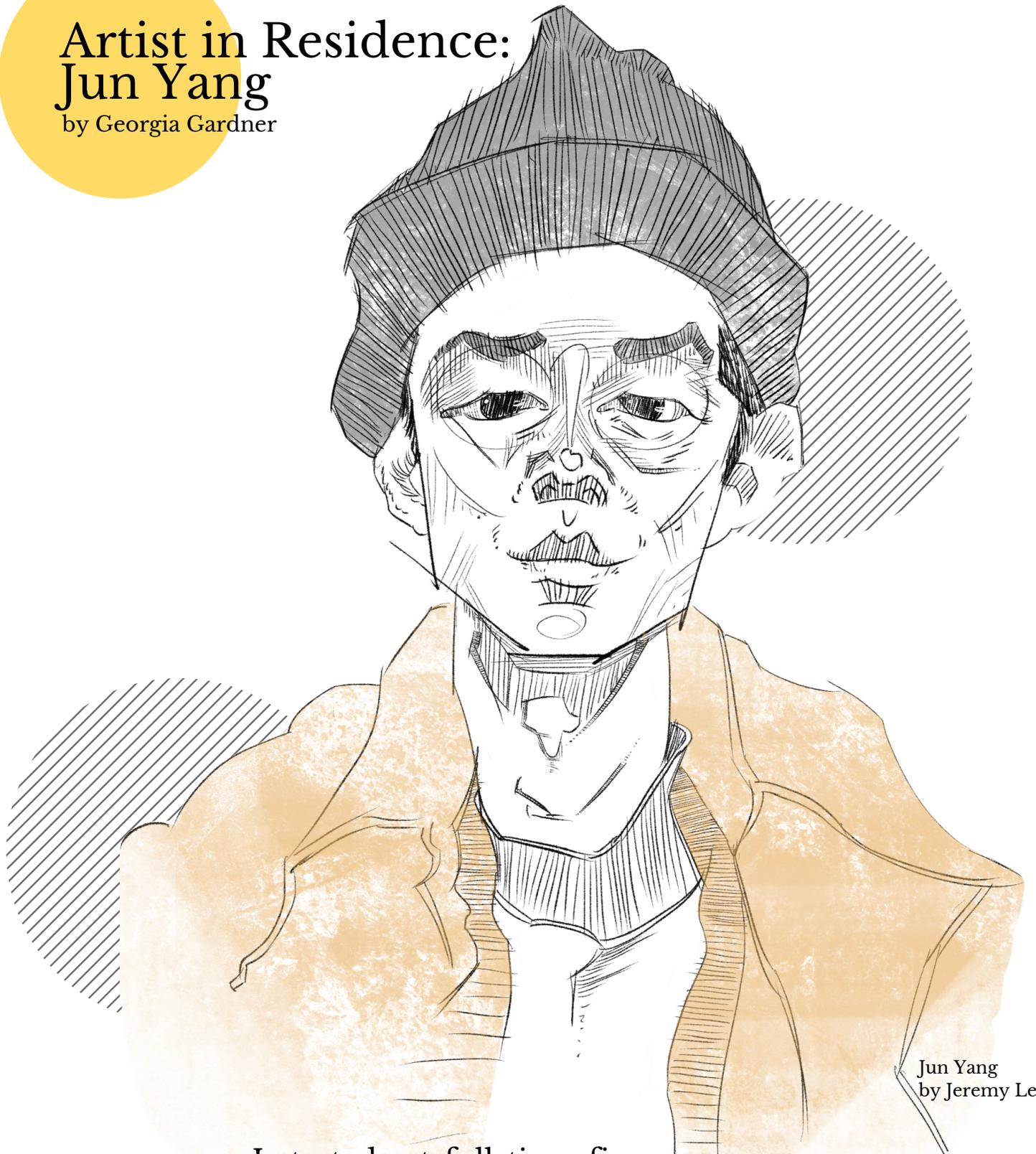
*Loyalty and
respect.*

15.
A good place
to die?

In Canada.

Artist in Residence: Jun Yang

by Georgia Gardner



Jun Yang
by Jeremy Lewis

“ I started art full time five years ago when my parents passed away. So it was my therapy. I wanted to get my hands dirty and express my feelings. I created it for myself, not with the idea in my head that I wanted to sell my works. ”

The Lighthouse Immersive Artist in Residence program was designed to give visual artists a unique opportunity to showcase their work within *Immersive Van Gogh* exhibitions across North America. Artists are invited to create work during their residency around the theme of Vincent van Gogh all whilst surrounded by a community of art enthusiasts at the onsite venue. This gives local artists an opportunity to build connections, create networks, collaborate, and share work with other artists and the general public. We spoke with the Project Coordinator Kelsey Sewell about the motivations behind the project and Jun Yang, San Francisco's outgoing resident artist about his experience over the course of his residency.

"I come from a background of theatre and supporting the arts," says Sewell, "I've noticed that my friends and co-workers in the arts have suffered from the lack of opportunities due to the pandemic. This program is unique as *Immersive Van Gogh* is unique. We are personalising the van Gogh experience to these cities across North America. I think it is important that this program is something we can bring to local communities."

The Artist in Residence program invites artists into *Immersive Van Gogh* venues. A portion of the venue will be used as a studio and gallery space for the length of their residency and take inspiration from Vincent van Gogh's body of work. Artists will be able to create, showcase and sell their artwork on-site, as well as connect with attendees from the local community. The program is designed for participation, which ranges between 4-6 weeks. Artists will be present at van Gogh venues for approximately 40 hours/week.

Lighthouse Immersive is not doing a national call. Instead, in each of the cities where *Immersive Van Gogh* exhibits take place, the call for artists will be restricted to that specific city. Yang, the current Resident Artist, is a San Francisco-based artist. In terms of where the idea for this all started, Sewell continues, "I think it started with Corey Ross (Co-Producer of *Immersive Van Gogh*) wanting people to come to the venue to connect with the local part of this exhibit. We're trying to reinvigorate the local arts and culture community."

In terms of expanding the Artist in Residence program, Lighthouse Immersive has created a new website portal, containing information on the *Immersive Van Gogh* production, the Artist in Residence program and how to apply. This portal will have a permanent place on the *smART Magazine* website. Lighthouse Immersive has incorporated the production's generic information about *Immersive van Gogh* for attendee's, with specificities about the application for those interested in the residency. The production has also launched their New York call for artist applications, as well as their call for artists in Charlotte, North Carolina. In San Francisco, a new resident artist will be launched by the end of May.

Yang shared his highlights and challenges of the program, as his term with *Immersive van Gogh* comes to a close: "It was unique dealing directly with the public as you need to feel very comfortable and confident with yourself. People will often interrupt your work and take pictures of your materials, asking what paint you use." The artists in this program would have to be comfortable with getting both positive and negative feedback, distractions as they work, and the premise that their role in this project contains an element of performance. A creative challenge to this residency is the rewarding pull to change your work to fit the space. This can be taken literally, as in forming portraits of van Gogh's face itself, or figuratively, such as an artist reworking their existing subject matter to a style that resembles van Gogh's thick brushstrokes.

While it is a rewarding experience, Yang admits to some anxiety in being a performance artist. He explains that he feels his art has an un-aesthetic quality when he is creating his base layers, that he does not necessarily want viewers of his artwork to see. As a result, he has learned to paint quickly, to avoid judgements on his unfinished work. Yang has held his position in San Francisco for the last twenty days, and has created almost twenty paintings during this time, which is almost a painting a day, but he works on different pieces simultaneously.



The high intensity atmosphere is one that he says motivates him to create so many works. In terms of what he thinks should be done differently in the program from the artist's perspective, it would be beneficial to have the option of a small area sectioned-off from the public, while maintaining an open and inviting space for those passing by, as it can be hard to focus. As for Yang's favourite aspect of the residency, he feels that the community engagement role has been the most valuable. He explains that in San Francisco, most people are Covid-19 vaccinated, and he is fully vaccinated, so it means he is not threatened by meeting people, which is very special.

“ It was unique dealing directly with the public as you need to feel very comfortable and confident with yourself. People will often interrupt your work and take pictures of your materials, asking what paint you use. ”

To further enhance the *Immersive Van Gogh* VIP experience, the artists will be called upon to create a small piece of art of their choice, such as a small art sample or framed print of their work, preferably pre-created or with the ability to produce large quantities on site to then be gifted to the VIPs. Artists' material expenses for this project will be covered, subject to approval by a company representative.

A large privilege that the Artist in Residence program offers, is that throughout the pandemic, the artist is given the opportunity to grow a following, which for Yang, included prestigious clients. “During this pandemic, I didn't have many opportunities to be a part of events like these. My favourite part of this whole experience was getting to meet so many clients, which include Google's co-founder (Sergey Brin) and our Lieutenant Governor in California, (Eleni Kounalakis). That was really exciting and I felt really lucky.”

The additional promotional opportunities also include digital publicity, such as the opportunity to be featured on the *Immersive van Gogh* social media pages, as well as a profile article on *smART Magazine*.

“I started making art full time five years ago when my parents passed away,” Yang continues, “so it was my therapy. I wanted to get my hands dirty and express my feelings. I created it for myself, not with the idea in my head that I wanted to sell my works.” While discussing his beginning process Yang confesses he had not thought much about his audience, or cultivating his art into what he thought viewers might like. In this mindset, he never felt like he had to try and change his viewers perception of what they thought about his art. Yang is a self professed “night owl”, as he believes he is his most creative at night. This led him to creating owls, because he identifies with them habitually, and was inspired by each owl having their own unique beautiful design. By creating these owls, it brought him a lot of attention from those who love animals, as well as art. People started giving him suggestions and ideas on other animals he could paint. He says he feels a connection to painting them because we, (the human race) also share this earth with them, therefore, they deserve the same societal recognition for the value they uphold.

Over the last two years Yang has felt that he has been unable to ignore all the political current events happening in the world right now. It has had an impact on himself personally, and within his art. Specifically, when it comes to his own gender identity, and recent racial conflicts. In conjunction with living through this pandemic, Yang's style of painting has changed a lot. His current artworks have been more figurative, abstract, and more expressive. He tells *smART Magazine* that his followers, audience and artworks are now based all over the world, obtaining international recognition.

Emmet Cohen: *Forever Modern*

by John Nyman



Emmet Cohen
by Kalya Ramu

“They say New York is the city that never sleeps, but I also think New York is the city that will never die.”

Joining us from the book-and-houseplant-lined walls of his Harlem walk-up minutes after getting off the yoga mat, renowned jazz pianist Emmet Cohen cut a different figure from his slick, tuxedo-clad appearance on the cover of his newest album, *Future Stride*. Both personas, however, are very much part of Cohen's creative philosophy. Buoyed by his deep gratitude for both the contemporary New York jazz community and the older generation of jazz masters he's studied and performed with in his ongoing Masters Legacy Series, Cohen's thoughts give an invigorating glimpse at the insight and innovation behind his contributions to a genre he calls "forever modern."

We've been hearing a lot about how 'New York is back' as the city recovers from the events of the past year. What's your sense of the current artistic atmosphere?

They say New York is the city that never sleeps, but I also think New York is the city that will never die.

It seems like we're almost on the other side of it now, but a lot of people were in dire straits this year, and I think it was a tough period to get through—particularly for people who made their rent doing a \$100 gig here and there. Seeing that economy evaporate created a lot of dissonance among freelance, independent artists. I think it was very difficult to know what to do at that time.

But there were a few people who stepped up for the community at large. My friend Benny Benack III, who plays trumpet, was out on the streets playing outdoor gigs, creating environments where people could come and play outside at a socially distanced jam session. We were out there playing in the freezing cold! But you adjust. Jazz music has always adjusted, and it's always adapted. That's what it preaches and teaches: it's about flexibility, it's about adaptation, and it's been amazing to see how the music has evolved in that time and space.

My friend Evan Sherman did a lot of playing out on the street as well. He wasn't part of the establishment; he would just set up a band in the street and bring some music to the people.

Another one is Spike Wilner, who runs Smalls Jazz Club. Smalls stayed open the entire time, doing live streams, taking sponsorships, paying musicians to come in and play. He really kept the flame alive. He evolved with the protocols, set up partitions so that 13 people could come into the club, etc. That's not really even financially viable, but it does something for the lifeblood of the scene.

That's what we tried to do with *Live from Emmet's Place* through a virtual channel. It's 100 years after the roaring 20s, since the Harlem Renaissance, since Prohibition, and here we are 100 years later throwing a Harlem rent party—in the same spot, on the same street. I live on Edgecombe Avenue, the same avenue Duke Ellington and his whole band lived on, in addition to Billie Holiday and so many others. And we're doing our modern-day Harlem rent party virtually, which is an adaptation a century later. I think one of the most rewarding things about what we did was the fact that musicians would come here and play with us and say, "Man, I haven't played a gig with other humans in eight or nine months. This feels so good!" That revitalizes the individual musicians, but it also introduces a whole new audience to who these people are and what their music is about.

I think what it really comes down to is the sense of community—and how we can continue to feed life and energy into that sense of community for people who need it most, especially when they can't get together in person.

Your *Live From Emmet's Place* livestream has been a mainstay of lockdown-era culture over the past year. Will you be continuing with your virtual series of concerts?

It wasn't like I schemed up a big idea to have the best livestream series in the world for jazz. We were supposed to play in Kansas on March 23rd, 2020, and the promoter called us and said, "Hey, I know you're supposed to play here tonight, but the state of everything is looking pretty rough. The University of Kansas wants to give you the full performance fee just to do something from your house. Say it's sponsored by us, and put something good out into the world. We need this."

So, I was quarantining with my two bandmates, who are basically family: Kyle Pool and Russel Hall. They live just a stone's throw away, down the street here. And they came up and we did this little livestream. We lugged drums up a five-floor walk-up and just turned on an iPhone. It sounded like a Game Boy, but it got almost 40 or 50,000 views. People were so grateful that there was this place to go, this place to join others and do something. And that's what the music has been for so long: a place for people to come together and feel the vibrations together. I realized this was something that was necessary in the world. So, we said, "Why don't we do this again next week?"



After that, there was this natural evolution of building a team. I have someone working in the back end now. For people who can't watch the full shows, I choose my favourite tracks and then post them individually on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. There's something there for everyone. We've had such a wide range of people coming through: people like Joe Lovano, Catherine Russell, and Samara Joy. It's been crazy inspiring to see it unfold.

To answer your question, I don't know if it will ever truly, 100% go away. Will we be doing it every week when I'm on the road? Probably not. But I think there's a time and place to keep it going, and to keep adding to the archive we've created. Those decisions kind of make themselves clear.

How has the pandemic inspired you to think differently about the New York jazz scene and your role within it?

I think everything influences what happens in the future: all my experiences, all my relationships, all my friends, every single book I read, every time I enter my yoga mat and take a class and connect with the earth, every time I cook a meal... I think that it's more than just the jazz scene, it's more than just what's next for that or what's my role. It's about who I want to be. It's about asking how are all these things I'm doing intertwined, how can I relate them all, and what can I give to the world and the scene?

What I've noticed about the jazz scene now is that I've become someone who can offer opportunities, who can raise someone up who needs to be discovered. It's become less about me me me me me, and more about how I can help the people who need it.

I try to take it one day at a time. The longer distances can be harder to look ahead to, but as we look at the next year or year and a half, things are opening back up, so I'm going to be on the road a lot more. Probably more than I was even before the pandemic, since everyone's trying to make up for everything that was cancelled, and there are new things on top of that. People want us to license *Emmet's Place* and take it around the country. So, a lot of exciting things are happening, but at the same time I'm trying to remember to be whole, pure, and down to earth.

On your latest album, what is the inspiration behind the name *Future Stride*, and how did the events of the last year or so contribute to the atmosphere and spirit of the album?

Funny enough, the album was recorded before the pandemic. But the concept, basically, is that there are so many paradoxes in jazz. Like in life, there are so many opposite forces that work to create the balance of what something is or can be. With *Future Stride*, we have really gone back into the lexicon as a group and as a community. There are many people in our New York jazz community, like Joe Saylor, Bryan Carter, Evan Sherman, Yasushi Nakamura, Tivon Pennicott, Bruce Harris, Patrick Bartley, Benny Benack III, and Ruben Fox. These are all people I grew up playing around and in a community with. The whole trend of the community really reached back into the history: we wanted to know about all the decades and eras of jazz.

One particular style and movement we were interested in was the early jazz movement, from people like Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, Mary Lou Williams, Earl Hines, and James P. Johnson. I didn't find much of their music in the New York scene that I was part of, so I really wanted to go back and explore that, and I spent many years dealing with their music. I really wanted to find a way to incorporate it, because this stuff is forever modern. It can make people feel things that are current and relevant in this time. When I play stride on the piano, people react to it like it's affecting them currently—it's not like I'm playing this old, antiquated thing. It's very much now, very much present, and very much forever modern. In that sense, it's like all great art.

So, *Future Stride* is about dealing with that music, revitalizing it, incorporating it, and mixing it into the other styles of music and other decades of jazz. It's about dealing with 100 years of music, but in a natural way. It's not about how to put all this stuff together mathematically. It's about the fact that we love all this stuff, and we're going to play it! Maybe we'll take the solo piano piece and orchestrate it out into a piano trio, then play it for 20 days in a row on the road, and all of a sudden it's our own. That's how so much of the music was developed.

The other part of the album is that we're looking into the future, and how we can affect the atmosphere and the landscape of music and humanity. And stride right into it, smooth. You know, smooth the edges.

I'd also been doing this project called the Masters Legacy Series. It's an ongoing project where I play with the oldest generation of jazz musicians, the ones with the wealth, the knowledge, and the connection to the history, and pair them with the musicians in our generation, to focus on that intergenerational transference of knowledge. Part of *Future Stride* is a direct response to that. We're saying we've learned all these lessons from the jazz masters—people like Ron Carter, George Coleman, Jimmy Cobb, Jimmy Heath, Tootie Heath, and Benny Golson—and we're taking the lessons we've learned from those masters and bringing them to our generation, to make the music come to life in our time.

IN FOCUS: bluemouth inc.

by Vik Hovanisian



bluemouth inc.
by Jeremy Lewis

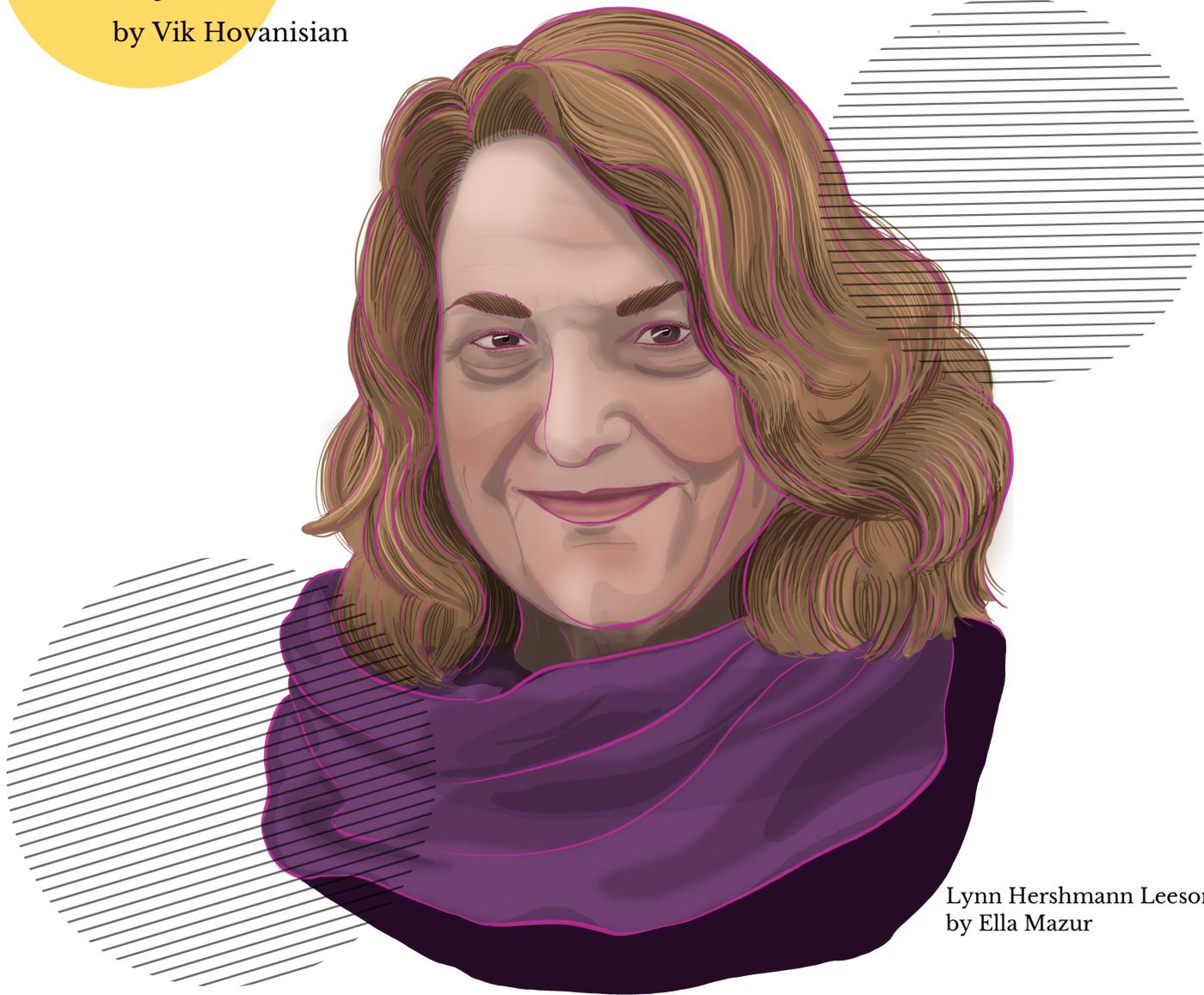
IN FOCUS presents fascinating conversations with some of the world's leading thinkers in the arts.

For Issue 5, we turn our focus to Stephen O'Connell and Lucy Simic of the groundbreaking performance collective bluemouth inc.

Watch the full interview at the smART Magazine YouTube Channel

Proust Questionnaire: Lynn Hershmann Leeson

by Vik Hovanisian



Lynn Hershmann Leeson
by Ella Mazur

In 1886, young M. Proust revealed his precocious and subtle spirit in a common parlour game, the “confessional” questionnaire, that was popular within Victorian society. While significant cultural and intellectual figures such as Oscar Wilde, Karl Marx and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle also left such confessions to posterity, it was Proust’s, in his refined form, that provided one of the most widely used personality questionnaires in history. Discovered and published in 1924 by psychoanalyst A. Berge, who found that Proust had “strived to reflect the most elusive nuances of thought,” the document became well-known as “Le Questionnaire de Proust.”

As an artist, Lynn Hershmann Leeson’s work has been featured in many international art galleries, including the public collections of the MoMa in New York, the National Gallery of Canada, the Tate Modern, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. As a filmmaker, her six feature films have screened at the Sundance Film Festival, TIFF and the Berlin International Film Festival. Her work has always looked to the future, whether by experimenting with artificial intelligence and virtual reality as art media, or with genetics and biotechnology in her The Infinite Engine installation and her 2018 exhibition Anti-Bodies at the House of Electronic Arts in Basel.

1.
Your chief characteristic?

Curiosity and persistence.

2.
What would you like to be?

Younger.

3.
What do you detest above all?

Conflict.

5.
Your friends' best virtues?

Honesty and humour and kindness.

4.
The quality you favour in women?

Honesty and humour and kindness.

10.
Your real-life heroines?

People like Ada Lovelace, Gertrude Stein... People who fight to make a difference, who fight to do their art, who protect their own creativity and use it as a gesture to help humanity.

6.
Your main flaw?

Self-deprecation.

7.
Your favourite past-time?

Probably the 18th century.

8.
The faults you most indulge?

Things that taste sweet.

9.
Your idea of happiness?

Being with my family and everybody's healthy.

13.
The natural gift you wish to have?

Straighter hair.

12.
The reform you most admire?

Women's right to abortion.

11.
The historical figures you hold in contempt?

Hitler.
Maybe that's enough.

14.
How would you like to die?

Peacefully, with my family.

15.
Your motto?

Never give up.

16.
Your current state of mind and spirit?

Bouncy.

Boulevard Arts & the Lighthouse Immersive App: *Technology, Convenience, & Art*

by Augusta Monet



Elizabeth Reede

“ Everybody deserves to have a little bit of art in their lives. Our view is that everyone deserves access to it. So that’s how we’re doing it. ”

The pandemic has highlighted the need for accessibility within arts by presenting us with a rather large barrier to overcome. These barriers existed pre-pandemic, just not for all of us. For a myriad of reasons, many people were never able to get exposure to the arts. We've learned many of these accommodations were always feasible, as solutions were found once necessity demanded invention. As we come out of Covid, we have to ask the question: what other roadblocks to accessibility remain?

One group that has been working to close this gap is Boulevard Arts, a New York-based immersive art and culture technology company that develops experiences via virtual, augmented, and mixed reality. Co-founder Elizabeth L. Reede joins us to speak on their newly-launched collaboration with Lighthouse Immersive to develop an app that equalizes arts accessibility for the public.

What is the Lighthouse Immersive App and how will it enhance the exhibit experience?

It's meant to be a comprehensive deep dive into immersive art and culture experiences. If we think in terms of a brick-and-mortar venue that people visit, this app is meant to kick in after they leave the experience, giving them something more. It will be replete with content we've developed in conjunction with the Lighthouse Immersive team, including all kinds of additional information and exciting technological ways of engaging with the artist or subject. It will also offer interesting information and content about the city in which the venue has opened. So if somebody sees this in Charlotte, North Carolina, and they think to themselves, "Why Charlotte? What's there, and how does Charlotte relate culturally to what is happening with my ticket once I go to the venue?" They can check the app.

There will be an e-commerce aspect to it too, plus opportunities to learn a bit more about the artist and to gain greater context. As this app expands, and more exhibitions come to various Lighthouse Immersive venues, further content will be added. You'll tap on Lighthouse Immersive two years from now, and see an array of really interesting engagements: textual, audio, and interactive content shared through leading edge technology. The user can not only buy a ticket and read about the exhibit, but also use technology to engage further with arts and culture.

What is your vision in regards to how this app can contribute to Lighthouse Immersive as an arts-and-culture hub across North America?

What's interesting is that Lighthouse Immersive has just hit the tip of the iceberg. I think one of the reasons why they are very interested in working with Boulevard Arts is the component we want to bring to it. If Lighthouse represents the tip of the cultural experience mountain, we offer everything else starting at the base. Our goal as a company has always been to democratize access to art and culture through leading edge technology.

We are a team of professional curators, technology folks, museum and art people, who've created public installations, run educational programs, built apps, all sorts of things. Our goal was to come together and ensure there were as few boundaries as possible for people to experience this content and this amazing world without feeling intimidated by it, or bored — or any of the things one can conjure up when we think about "Oh God, a museum?" People don't often know how to enter and own it; they feel like it's not for them. We've brought together lead educators, artists, and curators to make sure we offer multiple entry points to any user who comes in. And we do this through technology, which effectively means anybody with a smart device can have access.



What we hope to do with the app is to add this component of a more traditional museum and cultural access, and pack it into Lighthouse Immersive. If we as a combined entity are able to go back to these collections that we know so well and bring that forward, it only enhances the whole experience. And it extends it! We want people to realize that the app will consistently provide fresh content around the larger construct. It could be street art, it could be contemporary art, it could be Egyptian art. But the whole idea is: this is where you come for cool interesting stuff, where there's a little something for everyone.

What unique challenges did your team face in approaching this collaboration, and what has it taught you about the changing landscape in the arts as a result of the pandemic?

That's a great question, because the last 18-24 months have really been a learning experience for us. To set that up: Boulevard Arts delivers apps and experiences in virtual, augmented, and mixed reality—three separate platforms. Two of those (virtual and mixed) require headsets, and in a pandemic world, headsets are not going to be used. We made a commitment about two and a half years ago to primarily focus on building in augmented reality because it was such a fluid and flexible medium, and much more accessible to people on their smartphones.

What we started to see very early on, almost pre-pandemic, was that there had already been a reticence around putting on headsets; whether it was the cost, or the challenge of using it at home, school, or any public space. We can manage all the technological issues, but the sophistication of the public simply was not there. COVID and the pandemic has been an accelerant for the need for immersive and

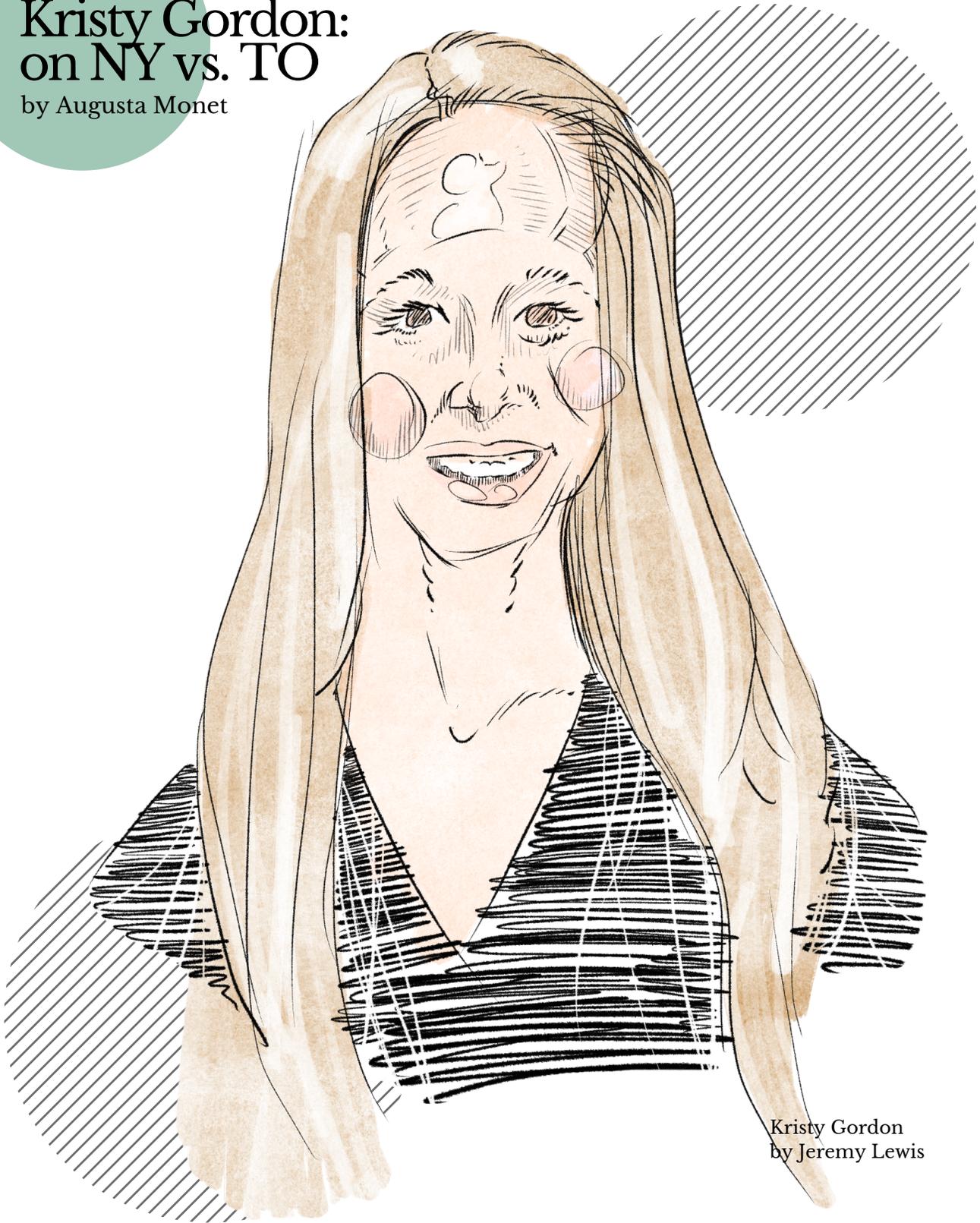
available technologies that deliver remotely. The obvious examples are schools, but think about how in New York, everything shut down because the situation was so dire here. And yet, people were craving experiences and things to do, so we really focused in on delivering augmented reality experiences. We also reached out to entities to say “Hey, we're doing everything free for you, don't worry about it, you know? Let's just get through the pandemic, and keep these relationships going with school groups, let's keep them functioning.” This was obviously met with great relief and gratitude.

“ It could be street art, could be contemporary art, it could be Egyptian art. But the whole idea is: this is where you come for cool interesting stuff, where there's a little bit of something for everyone. ”

At the same time I started looking around to see who else was in this space in a really meaningful way. And when I say in the space, I mean who else is delivering this kind of on-site, brick-and-mortar, all-encompassing experience? Then I started to do a deep dive on the kind of technology being used by Lighthouse Immersive. Our first conversation with them went like this: “You guys are doing amazing things. Here's what we at Boulevard Arts think we can help you do: build out the authenticity and scope of the cultural content that's being delivered, to help you foster an even more incredible opportunity for visitors, something where people walk away feeling like they've had a real connection.” It took off from there. So, I think that's what we feel so committed to: this notion of developing a sustained and personal experience for people through the arts. Because, as you know, that's our goal here. Everybody deserves to have a little bit of art in their lives. Our view is that everyone deserves access to it. So that's how we're doing it.

Kristy Gordon: on NY vs. TO

by Augusta Monet



Kristy Gordon
by Jeremy Lewis

“ I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad, or commit a crime.

Toronto is often thought of as the New York of Canada. The comparison has some merit as Toronto is also a sprawling city known as a hub of arts and culture. Still, is this a matter of wishful thinking on Ontario's part? Both Toronto and New York have a diverse and well kept arts-community, thanks in large part to the cafe culture found in these cities. Independent cafes serve as affordable and accessible spaces outside the home for artists to work, often giving newer artists exposure and connections to other artists.

We wanted to find out just how much these two cities share in their relationships to arts and culture. Artist Kristy Gordon, graduate from Toronto's OCAD and a New York City resident, joins us to discuss the roles of cafes in facilitating arts culture in a city.

How have the cafes and arts spaces in New York and Toronto impacted your creative life?

Setting greatly affects the work that artists do, that's probably one of the reasons that artist residencies are so important to artists. When I lived in Toronto my work was influenced by the other artists I knew and the paintings I saw in galleries like the Art Gallery of Ontario as well as the contemporary galleries in Yorkville and the Junction. When I first came to Toronto I took some classes at the Academy of Realist Art, so I created traditional looking portrait paintings. Later, I started going to the Ontario College of Art and Design, where I was encouraged to experiment with my paintings and my work became much more painterly and expressive.

In New York City I'm influenced by the artistic dialogues and conversations I have with artists, as well as by the work I see in museums and in commercial galleries in the Chelsea and Soho Gallery districts. In NYC my work went through an experimental phase, influenced by contemporary art in the Chelsea galleries and now it's settled into an imaginative but representational approach influenced by the Renaissance artists and Dutch masters I see at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as observation from nature at the American Museum of Natural History.

“ That sense of community, just being around people, while also being able to isolate and ignore everyone makes me very comfortable. ”

In both cities, the cafes are a meeting spot for me and other artists. When I meet with artist friends at a cafe or restaurant we'd usually talk about the work we're creating, the galleries we're working with or the blocks we're facing. It's similar in NYC, but way more frequent. I go out for coffee every day. It's like my big social event and an excuse to leave the house. There are also a lot of drink-and-draw events in art spaces around NYC, and it's fun to get together with over 100 people all drawing from a live model! This is a place where I can meet new artists too.

How would you compare the two cities pertaining to arts and cafe culture?

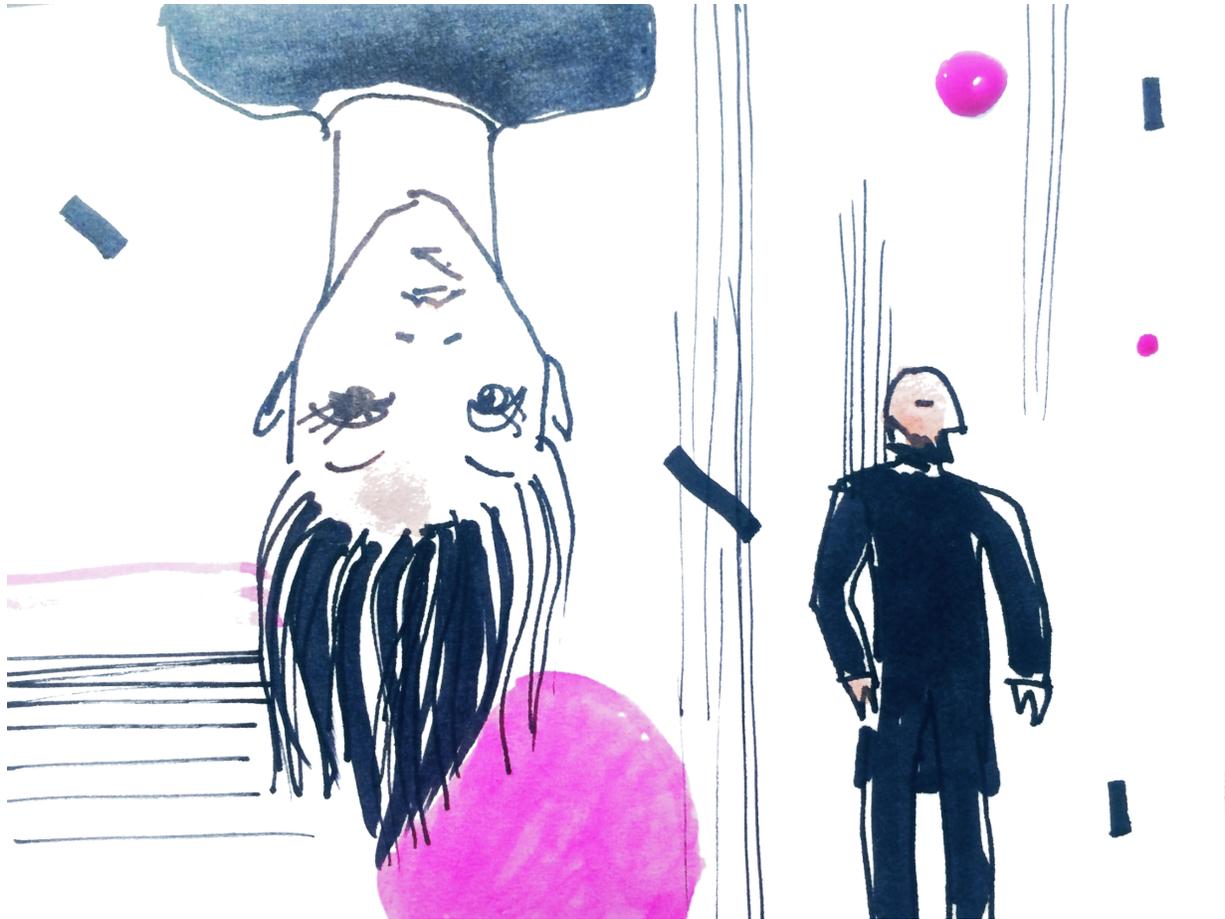
For me the main difference is that I utilize the cafes and art events more in NYC. It's more common that I would take my laptop to a cafe and do some work there. That sense of community, just being around people, while also being able to isolate and ignore everyone makes me very comfortable. I feel like in NYC there's just more happening. In Toronto I was able to create events among my group of artist friends, like hiring a life model together to paint from, because I know a lot of artists in Toronto, but we were organizing these things ourselves. Toronto does have a rich artistic community with a lot of artists, galleries and collectors supporting artists, so it was a great place to meet other artists and build connections. To this day some of my closest friends live in Toronto and the work they're doing inspires me.

What are your favourite small venues, cafes, restaurants in either city?

In Toronto my favorite meeting spots were Live, the Big Carrot, Fresh and Jet Fuel. I would meet with my artist friends either at Live (which sadly has closed now) or at my favorite coffee shop Jet Fuel Coffee. I'd often start my mornings at Jet Fuel and would sometimes sit there for hours, working on my comic journal. In NYC it's whatever coffee shop is the best in my neighborhood. So, I frequented Variety Coffee in Bushwick because that was my neighbourhood. Also, Sugarburg in Williamsburg and Think Coffee all around the city. Everything was happening in coffee shops! My favorite Drink-and-Draw was the Starr Street one that was happening on Wednesdays in Bushwick. My favorite restaurant in NYC, where I've had countless evenings with artist friends, is Caravan of Dreams in Manhattan.

chekhovOS /an experimental game/

by Camilla Mikolajewska



“ It is a sense of loss, the fragility of human life, a sense of life having almost no logic and being taken away from the characters in the play. ”

On Sunday, June 20th and Thursday June 24th, Artistic Director Igor Golyak will premiere *chekhovOS /an experimental game/*, an interactive online theatre experience. Better yet, it's a performance that thousands of people can enjoy together from all around the world. Golyak has been a leading innovator of virtual theatre since the start of the pandemic, with his recent production *State Vs. Natasha Banina* being a Critic's Pick in The New York Times. *chekhovOS /an experimental game/* combines film, theatre, and video game technology together to create a new medium where viewers are able to interact with the performers. We had the opportunity to sit with Golyak to discuss his creative process, working alongside Mikhail Bayshnikov, and the impact virtual theatre has on society today.

Inspired by Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and Chekhov's letters, *chekhovOS* accesses the operating system behind Chekhov's computer and the world in which his characters live in search of happiness. The project was developed in the new and emerging genre of virtual theatre at Arlekin's Zero Gravity Lab, by an elite group of collaborators, fostered by Golyak himself. The start of this production began when it gained some interest from the Baryshnikov Art Centre. Reflecting on this moment, Golyak recalls that, "we had the pleasure of having Mikhail Baryshnikov at three or four of our shows after which he invited us to present *State vs Natasha* at his art centre. That's where our relationship started. The same with Jessica Hecht, who attended a few of our performances, after which we started speaking and thinking about what we can do together." From there, Golyak and Hecht got together with a few of their close friends and colleagues for a two-day rehearsal via Zoom, followed by a one-day reading and exploration of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. This was when they realized that Chekhov was extremely fitting to the current psychological and physical state we're all currently experiencing.

"It is a sense of loss," Golyak continues, "the fragility of human life, a sense of life having almost no logic and being taken away from the characters in the play, just like life was being taken from Chekhov while he was writing this play dying from tuberculosis. All of these things are embedded in the play, and although not directly spoken of, it's what is not being said that is at the forefront of Chekhov's poetics." As a result of that reading, they decided it would be interesting to keep exploring these poetics through this digital lens.

"We started filming some scenes from *The Cherry Orchard* and I thought it would be a good idea to share it virtually to many people who may find themselves struggling through the pandemic, and for people to relate to some of these characters from 120 years ago."

The filming process took about a week, including three days of rehearsal and three days of filming. As an end result, the production will include some live elements and some pre-recorded elements. Golyak then had the idea of incorporating Chekhov into the production itself, so he contacted Baryshnikov to ask him for some advice and discuss this project. Baryshnikov jumped on the idea and said he wanted to play the role of Anton Chekhov himself. The remainder of the cast is composed of a wide variety of well known stage and film actors including Jessica Hecht, Mark Nelson, Anna Baryshnikov, Melanie Moore, Nael Nacer, Jeffrey Hayenga, Darya Denisova and Anna Bortnick.

A question that arose was what some of the challenges may be for these actors when the audience is absent from the same space? Surely it would be a different experience than performing on stage for a live audience. However, Golyak explains that all of these actors have a lot of experience in film, where you don't usually have an audience present. He mentions in fact that sometimes the audience helps a production but other times they hurt the production. "We treated this production as a film, and one of the challenges was that they had to trust me completely. I had no idea what was going to happen, I had some drawings of what the space would look like, but they just had to trust me that it was all going to come together in the end. We didn't do the whole play, only particular scenes, we didn't have costumes, it was kind of a proof of concept and see what happens with it. Although I had an initial concept page that I later designed, that ended up changing."



Golyak explains that the most difficult thing with these actors was that only two of them had seen his productions before, one being *State Vs. Natasha*, which was a virtual production. “They just had to be ok with not knowing how anything was going to turn out while working with a director that doesn’t have any film experience. This production is a mixture of film, game, and theatre; so in that sense no one has any experience with mixing these three elements and no one knows how to do it right. I think we got some things right, while others we can keep developing.”

Being a virtual production makes *chekhovOS* a very site specific theatre. According to Golyak, any theatre is always site specific. “Every theatre space has its own energy and pathway of affecting the audience and it’s up to the director to figure out what the best uses of each space are. Virtual theatre is a type of site specific theatre, so there are many advantages of using Zoom as our platform.” Golyak states that the fact that everyone is in the front row is an advantage. “We have a chat function, that you don’t normally have in a theatre, we have backgrounds and I can rearrange the gallery view. We are together from different places, experiencing something together.” In trying to figure out what makes it unique, Golyak raises the question of just how one makes it work. In order to make it work some sort of agency of the audience is needed.

An example of this would be considering how virtual theatre is different from Netflix. “Netflix will always be better as it doesn’t have to be live. However, what is the advantage of it being live? The audience needs to have a role, when you’re asked to see something, it’s one thing, if you’re asked to participate, it’s different. While watching this performance, the audience is going to be catching on to points, they’ll be interacting differently, it will be an experience versus being an observation.” So how exactly will the audience be interacting?



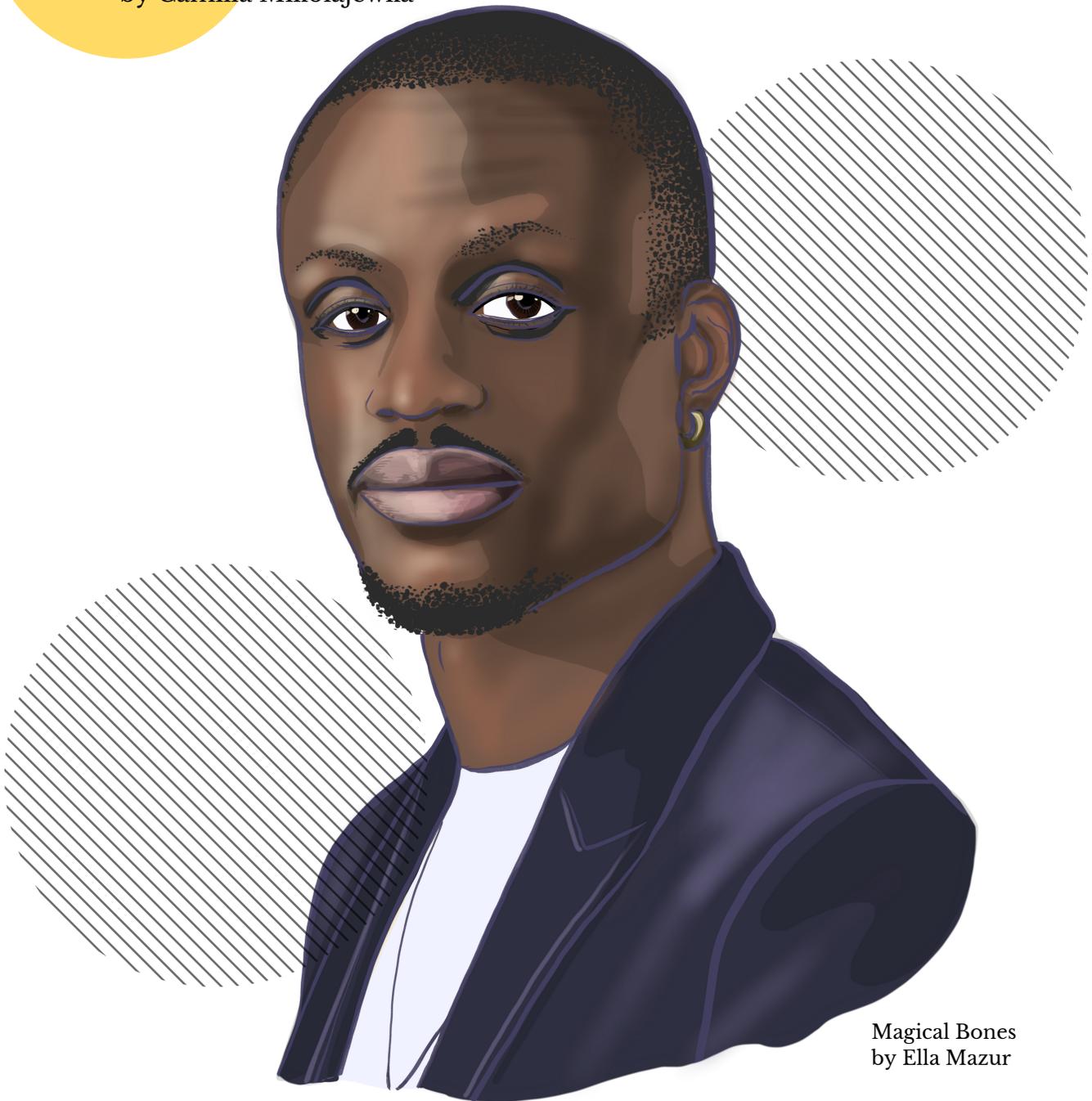
The audience makes a choice on the order of scenes and they interact directly with a live actor on stage by having their Zoom windows inserted into the virtual space. For example, your face appears in the back of the screen and the actor will ask you questions directly. The audience then makes a choice on how the play continues by deciding on whether we as human kind have changed since Chekhov's time and whether we should. The votes are put inside the game and theatre patrons will be able to use their phones as a remote control.

A common misconception with theatre is that it is for a bourgeois crowd, which many of the times it is. Here, however, you are receiving that high level theatre experience for a much cheaper cost. With that, it also opens an entire new market of accessibility. “You don’t need to go to Broadway or spend lots of money, with virtual theatre tickets can be much cheaper, the market is bigger and more people can now enjoy the arts, it’s a lot more accessible. I can get audience members from all different walks of life to have a shared human experience and make connections.”

While you may think that your chances of having culturally inspiring evenings are a thing of the past, *chekhovOS* presents an opportunity to order from your favourite restaurant, put on a nice outfit and tune in for a unique performance. Igor Golyak's *chekhovOS /an experimental game/* is the start of a new genre that will continue to thrive and excel well beyond the pandemic.

Magical Bones: In Praise of Black Magic

by Camilla Mikolajewka



Magical Bones
by Ella Mazur

“ The truth is that magic is an experience, and my personal belief is that it’s the experience of astonishment and wonder and that doesn’t only relate to just magicians, it can be to anyone. Anyone who can give you an experience of wonder...that’s magic. ”

Richard Essien (who goes by Magical Bones on stage) is considered to be one of the most exciting talents to emerge from the UK magic scene and has been entertaining audiences globally for over a decade. He was a finalist on *Britain's Got Talent* with his audition tape alone gaining over 10 million views online. We sat down with Essien to discuss his background, where he reflects on the reality of what it is like to be a Black magician. With the creation of his show *Black Magic*, Essien goes into the history of magic within the Black community and sheds light on the magicians whose stories have been neglected. Magical Bones breaks down the barriers of what it means to be a Black magician, sharing other peoples stories while creating his own. In anticipation of the opening of Lighthouse Immersive's ILLUSIONARIUM exhibit on July 29th, we speak with Essien about opening up an entire world to a large community of people who otherwise would struggle for recognition.

How do you think the magic industry compares to other performing arts industries when it comes to diversity?

To give some context and background as to why I decided to begin exploring Henry Brown, magic was just a hobby for me. I was always interested in this kind of separation where magic in the Black community has this sort of taboo while in white or Western societies it seems like pure entertainment. So from that context alone I always had a weird relationship with being a Black magician, and growing up I never knew any Black magicians or their history. With that being said, a lot of Black history is hidden. In the magic community we hear of Houdini, David Copperfield and more of the greats; however, there are quite a few people of colour in the magic industry who have done some amazing things but it hasn't really come to light.

So I had a show called *Black Magic* in Edinburgh and it was sort of an exploration of what

Black magic is, and what the relationship is in regards to conjuring magic within the community. I came across a story of Henry Brown, as I was writing *Black Magic* and I was fascinated by someone who's magic is more powerful than anything I ever heard of. In my opinion, his escape act is one of the greatest escape acts of all time. He wasn't just doing this for recognition from his peers like Houdini, he was doing it to liberate people. The fact that he then came to the UK and became a magician for 25 years, all these stories really resonated with me on a personal level.

For starters, I didn't know there was a Black magician touring across the UK and also didn't realize that he was the first recognized Black American magician who was seen as a celebrity. He was the David Blaine of his time, despite racism. I find these things quite fascinating and I just want to explore them.

These things for me are very nurturing, I've learned a lot about myself as a magician and bringing these topics to the UK really opens people's eyes and I think this is really a story that hasn't been told. You don't want to keep hearing the same old stories, I want something new. I want to talk about the female magicians, or Black female magicians. Ellen Armstrong for example was the first female magician to have her own touring show in America in the 1900s, which was unheard of as a Black female. These are the stories I'm looking to share.

“

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”



What would you say remains unique and relevant about the magical experience in a world where CGI and visual editing has desensitized our capacity for wonder and pleasant surprise?

That's a very interesting question, and the reason that it's interesting is because we have this debate in magic on how much editing can be used in TV or social media magic. What's fair and what isn't fair? This conversation is ongoing between magicians. There is a sort of level of trust that if you say something is done genuinely, meaning you haven't just used a CGI to make things appear or disappear, then that's impressive.

The truth is that magic is an experience, and my personal belief is that it's the experience of astonishment and wonder and that doesn't only relate to just magicians, it can be to anyone. Anyone who can give you an experience of wonder, whether it's a movie with an amazing CGI effect, or Whitney Houston belting out a note, once you get that feeling of astonishment, that's magic. So I'm not threatened by technology, because as a performer I believe magicians should be making people experience that regardless of how they do it.

Two of my favourite movies are *The Prestige* and *Now You See Me*, and there is an illusion they do in *Now You See Me* that I have yet to see a real world magician do, but I still love the idea. There is a moment where she floats in the air in a bubble and it was just a beautiful effect, and that was magic to me. I love that film because the effects are not outside the realms of possibility, a magician could conceivably create these effects so I enjoyed that. I don't care about the CGI, the results were magical and astonishing. I am fully engrossed in the storytelling.

“

In my opinion, [Henry Brown's] escape act is one of the greatest escape acts of all time. He wasn't just doing this for recognition from his peers like Houdini, he was doing it to liberate people.”

How did you make the transition from dance to magic, and what aspects of your personality as a dancer translates to your personality as a magician?

The transition was a natural evolution as a performer. I was working as a dancer for 15 years, and I would always be making card tricks on the set, messing around, showing people stuff, it was just a hobby and people were saying “oh you should do this,” so naturally I combined these ideas. I also used to dance in the street which allows you to be really expressive, and there are no rules, you just engage a crowd and try new things out.

So it was a natural progression from dance to magic, my name as a dancer was Bones and then I just transitioned into *Magical Bones*. It gives me a certain rhythm in my performance and I love to incorporate my music in my work. I do a song called “Hip Hop Story” which is about cards, so even the way I use cards or roll out my coins, I follow a rhythm. I call it soulful magic.

On *Portrayal*

by Natasha Abramova



Billie Mintz,
Director of *Portrayal*

“ Contributing to what he believes is solely a film on his extensive catalogue and creative process, he unknowingly exposes himself as a liar. ”

Hot Docs, North America's largest documentary festival, conference and market, is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to advancing and celebrating the art of documentary and to creating production opportunities for documentary filmmakers. Hot Docs presented a virtual version of its 28th annual festival from April 29-May 9, 2021, during which a full roster of industry conference sessions, market programs and networking events were held for Canadian and international delegates. This included the renowned Hot Docs Forum, Hot Docs Deal Maker, Distribution Rendezvous and The Doc Shop. This year's festival consisted of 219 long, mid-length, and short films from 66 countries across 12 programs. It was available, for the first time, to audiences across Canada.

One picture from the Artscapes program, *Portrayal*, caught my attention. This is a docudrama about an artist and an artisan, who they were and what they thought they were. Three brave men – a producer, a filmmaker and the film's protagonist – fearlessly dive into a real-life plot on fraud and hundreds of paintings in the possession of the story's 'bad guy'.

As a part of the Immersive Van Gogh project, and as a person who connects emotionally with the story of neglected artists, I was compelled to talk to the Director of *Portrayal* – Billie Mintz. A few years of work, across three continents still Billie still can't stop thinking about what has happened to him and to his crew. This is what he had to say on the matter:

Portrayal investigates claims against internationally recognized Israeli painter Oz Almoz ("Oz"), who allegedly created a false narrative surrounding his career by claiming authorship of paintings that were not his own. Oz built his reputation on this body of work and has to date evaded any inquiry regarding its authenticity except for one unsuspected intervening event: this documentary. What was initially positioned as a straightforward biography documenting Oz's success has inevitably turned into an exposé of the deception he committed in the process of "creating" this biography. Leading the charge to uncover the truth is Roman Lapshin, the grandson of Vladimir Dvorkin, whom Roman has learned is the real painter of Oz's works. Roman is spearheading his own investigation with the full hope and intention of confronting and exposing Oz. At the same time, he is hiding the full truth about these plans from his own family in order to secure their cooperation, leading them to believe that he is only participating in this film for the more altruistic goal of exhibiting his grandfather's work to the world.

Roman initially approached me with the story of his late grandfather, Vladimir Dvorkin, a prolific painter who emigrated from Russia to Israel to escape anti-Semitism and start a new life with more opportunity for his family. Broken and penniless, he had to start his life all over again after serving five years in prison for a crime he did not commit. He went to the streets of Israel to sell portraits, which was very humbling for a painter of such experience living in a country where no one knew his name or of his decorated past. Roman then told me about a man named Oz Almog who discovered Vladimir on the street and hired him to be his "assistant", beginning a relationship that enabled Vladimir to earn a living to support his family but ultimately took advantage of the immigrant painter, leaving him in the shadows while Oz gained fame claiming the paintings to be from his own hand. It was a wild tale that sounded a little unbelievable and worthy of investigation. Roman, now an adult and believing he has to fulfill his dead grandfather's wishes to tell the world the truth and exhibit his body of work in his own name, is preparing to confront Oz and take possession of the body of work rumoured to be in the thousands.

In order to get the full story, I had to approach Oz and find a way for him to participate in the film, which required me to engage in some creative manipulation of the truth myself since Oz would not cooperate if he knew what motivated my investigation. I could not reveal my knowledge of Roman and Dvorkin and their relationship to him. I could only reveal the portion of the truth which Oz wanted to hear – that the purpose of my documentary was to explore his background and what it was that enabled him to become such a prolific and successful artist and also to explore generally what it takes and what it means to have success as an artist, as well as the costs of achieving that success. All of which was still an accurate representation of what we were doing. Although reluctant, Oz agreed to participate and maintained the story that he was the real painter throughout our initial interviews in the development stage of the film.

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Oz is a fascinating antagonist for this documentary. He starts as the protagonist but once the audience realizes that he is living a lie and that Roman is determined to expose it, they too get immersed in the web of lies through dramatic irony. While the audience becomes fully cognizant of the deception that took place, Oz continues to perform a lie for me and the crew. Contributing to what he believes is solely a film on his extensive catalogue and creative process, he unknowingly exposes himself as a liar. It was equally awkward and uncomfortable for me as an investigative journalist having to take this approach knowing it was ironically necessary in order to ultimately tell the real truth. I had to be extremely diligent and careful in gathering the facts given the sensitivity of the information I was collecting, which could ultimately offend or humiliate the artist. Oz is open and because he is unaware of my knowledge of his past, he is constantly giving me information that would normally be protected.

After some coaxing, he hesitantly agreed to meet me at a café before deciding to be a part of the film. I flew to Vienna and staked out the meeting place the day before and found a vantage point for the camera so we could film the initial meeting, while Roman sat upstairs watching the whole thing unfold. From this vantage point, Roman had his very first glimpse of the mysterious man of his family's fairy tales. Because I also had a camera on Roman, I caught something that I did not foresee: Roman realizing that he might not be entirely right about Oz's character. I soon realized that although the events of history in Roman's story are true and need further investigation, the immorality may not be so black and white. What I thought was a story about Oz became a journey of Roman coming to terms with the reality of a world where Oz exists and is needed. There became a new facet of this complicated story: the realization that Oz isn't as bad as we thought he was. Even though Roman ends up confirming that his allegations about Oz are in fact true, he also comes to understand more about the decisions his grandfather needed to make as an immigrant needing to provide for his family and their future – the future that Roman inhabits. Roman is a young man caught in the story that his very identity had been shaped around, unable to face the truth that everyone around him is trying to get him to accept.

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Portrayal is a quixotic tale of a sheltered young man who confronts his family's controversial mythology and ends up learning about himself. This is an outrageous tale of a young boy who was so affected by his grandfather's mythology that he carried another man's burden with him until he himself was consumed by it. Now, in his mid twenties, he finally decides to track the man down and confront him while demanding justice for his late grandfather through the restoration of his paintings to their rightful owners – his family. What we have is a self-reflective film that explores truth and exploitation. Oz is withholding the full truth from the people; I am withholding the full truth from Oz; and Roman is withholding the full truth from his family about what he is doing.

As the story develops, similarities between the men emerge. Both are so committed to a narrative so personal to them that they refuse to see the facts. Through the intimate documentation of exploitation, the film suggests that history is not always truthful or factual and that relationships made in the name of art are always expendable. Every story that involves history has different versions depending on who is telling it. My interest in filming this documentary was to follow the journey of a young man who came of age while trying to find the truth to the story that was told to him in his childhood by his grandfather. This is a story about family, immigration, art, and exploitation. The film itself wrestles with an unreliable narrator and takes the audience on a wild ride through several countries as we confront the ghosts of the past.

Portrayal will be available soon in Canada on the CBC Documentary Channel and CBC Gem.

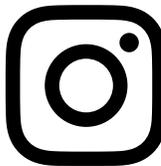
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