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Get involved with black performance art at YBCA

By Jessica Zack Updated 1:41 pm, Wednesday, June 24, 2015

In **Benjamin Patterson**'s landmark performance piece "Pond," participants stood around a chalked floor grid, moving windup toy frogs according to the experimental artist's instructions as well as the unpredictability of chance to create an escalating cacophony of toy amphibian sound. In other words, it's not your average, passive museum-going experience — and that is precisely what Patterson intended when he first performed "Pond" in 1962 as a founder of the international artists' network Fluxus and its only African American member.

Fifty-three years later, Patterson's "Pond" still shakes up viewers' expectations as the foundational piece, chronologically, in the multimedia exhibition "Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art," at **Yerba Buena Center for the Arts**.

The cleverly provocative exhibition, organized by **Valerie Cassel Oliver**, senior curator of the **Contemporary Arts Museum Houston**, is the first comprehensive survey of performance art by three generations of black artists, from the early 1960s to the present.

More than 100 photographs, performance relics, sculptures, videos and other documentation, as well as planned and spontaneous live performances in the galleries, "show the vivid experimentation of black visual artists who have been underrepresented, left out of art-world conversations, yet their history parallels the history of performance art itself, demanding direct engagement," says Cassel Oliver.

From **Carrie Mae Weems** to **Jayson Musson** (whose alter ego, **Hennessy Youngman**, skewers the art world in his "Art Thoughtz" YouTube series), the "Radical Presence" artists create vastly different situations — madcap transactions, identity peekaboos, bodily feats of endurance — that defy easy categorization. They strike tones ranging from provocation and social questioning to irony and humor.

Highlights include **Jean-Ulrick Désert**'s documentation of his travels through Germany wearing pink, "Caucasian-nude colored" lederhosen in "Negerhosen2000/The Travel Albums"; **Chitra Ganesh** and **Simone Leigh**'s powerful video of a woman in repose, trying to free herself from a pile of gravel; **Papo Colo**'s four-minute "Superman 51," performed in 1977 to protest Puerto Rico's unsuccessful bid for statehood; and **Pope.L**'s "Eating the **Wall Street Journal**," which has the artist-provocateur, who calls himself "the friendliest black artist in America," eating pages of the newspaper, with milk and ketchup, atop a plywood-and-paper tower.

Cassel Oliver notes that, in addition to the abundant multimedia documentation of past performances on display (a requisite, though less than ideal reality of performance based

performances on display (a requisite, though less-than-ideal reality of performance-based exhibitions), “there is a robust program of live events and interactive audience spaces” in Yerba Buena’s galleries.

Satch Hoyt’s participatory “Say It Loud” invites passersby to speak into a microphone atop a tower of black-history books. Oakland dancer **Brontez Purnell** will repeatedly perform Pope.L’s “endurance piece,” “Costume Made of Nothing,” defying attentional and physical limitations by holding long, still poses in the galleries.

Cassel Oliver says, “There are planned performances, as well as some that will be unannounced, spontaneous, so anyone can happen upon these enlivened moments in the space at any time.”

— *Jessica Zack*

Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art: Noon-6 p.m.

Wednesday and Sunday, noon-8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday. Through Oct. 11. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St., S.F. (415) 978-2787. www.ybca.org.

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