

***NEW* OBSERVATIONS**

STEP RIGHT UP! The Circus Comes to Town

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STEP RIGHT UP!

The Circus Comes to Town

New Observations Magazine

PUBLISHER & EDITOR: Mia Feroletto

GUEST EDITOR: Brenda Zlamany



Bread and Puppet Theater



Bread and Puppet Theater

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Elizabeth Streb *Open Workout*
 Photographer unknown, photo courtesy of Bobby Hedglin-Taylor

Under the Big Top

By Mia Feroletto

Although I was born in Burlington, Vermont, I spent my childhood in Trumbull, Connecticut, a small, rural town next to the urban city of Bridgeport. That was the place where P.T. Barnum launched his circus in 1870 and made his hometown of Bridgeport its home. As a child, I clearly remember the excitement my older brother and I felt when the circus came to town. We would get to stay up late and go down to Seaside Park on Long Island Sound where the big top tent would be set up. We would eat pink cotton candy and popcorn and be amazed by the antics of the clowns, the beauty of the horse acts, the thrill of the trapeze, and the massive size of the elephants.

Even as a small child, I defined myself as being an animal activist and was continually bringing home stray animals, some with injuries, for my doctor father to make well. I understood that live animals do not belong in the circus and that the performers, themselves, were exciting enough all on their own.

Many years later, I joined the Board of Directors of Dance Theater Workshop (DTW). As part of DTW, I became educated in the world of performance art and came to understand the skill, intellect and discipline that go into the creation of this work.

DTW was known as an incubator of the best and the brightest in the performance art world. As an organization, it boasts the highest number of recipients of the MacArthur Genius Award. It was the place where these talented performers were given the support and space needed to develop their work. Elizabeth Streb is one of those performers who began her career at DTW and went on to be honored by the MacArthur Foundation. In our interview, we discuss the trajectory of her career and the contribution that David White, the Executive Director of Dance Theater Workshop, made in her life.

The history of circus arts is centuries old—traveling from town to town to entertain people whose lives, in general, were filled with poverty and challenges including disease and early death. Not so unlike what we are experiencing today with the global pandemic of COVID. In fact, it was the desire to publish something lighthearted and uplifting that inspired me to invite Guest Editor Brenda Zlamany to collaborate on this issue of *New Observations Magazine* devoted to the circus.

Bread and Puppet Theater founder Peter Schumann discusses the history of Bread and Puppet and the nexus of art, activism and theater that they have done better than anyone for more than 50 years. Inviting the community to their museum and grounds in Glover, Vermont, Bread and Puppet inspired us all to live cleaner, simpler lives where we bake our bread, grow our vegetables and collaborate

in making art from materials that surround us in everyday life. Schumann's latest paintings are made on bed sheets instead of canvas. The papier mâché puppets and masks are made from old cardboard boxes, and branches found in the woods, reminding us that artists do not need expensive art supplies to make art.

Peter describes using the end rolls of newsprint from newspapers to create painted scrolls that were part of his early parades and performances in New York City back in the early days of Bread and Puppet. It reminded me of the time I tracked down the end rolls of newsprint from *The Daily News* for the artist and founder of *New Observations Magazine* Lucio Pozzi to use for his iconic performance piece, "Paper Swim," which I produced at the DIA Center for the Arts at 155 Mercer Street. An old firehouse, this building was used as the main office of DIA for many years. It is the building where administrator and former dancer Joan Duddy created a rehearsal space used by countless choreographers and dance companies while Joan was working there.

The potential for art is everywhere and in everyone. It is the creative force that the artist, once engaged, becomes addicted to finding again and again through the artistic process. This is a fact that everyone connected to this issue of *New Observations* knows to be true. It is part of the reason they have all chosen to "step right up!" The circus has come to town.

I would like to thank Brenda Zlamany for her efforts as Guest Editor of this issue. I would like to thank ALL of the contributors for their generosity and efforts to share their art and their ideas at a critical time for humanity. The ability to play will be vital in the next few years as we navigate our way through these challenging times. You are all part of our solution. I would especially like to thank Eric Aho for his piece on Katherine Bradford. I contacted him late in the process of putting together this issue and he stepped up with his signature talent and enthusiasm.

In addition, I would like to thank our graphic designer Diana Roberts and copy editor Leah Poller. And to Linda O'Brien for the gift of her transcription services. Thank you. *New Observations Magazine* is produced on a volunteer basis. We have reached hundreds of thousands if not millions of readers both in print and over the Internet. With the help of MoMA and RISD, we are digitizing all back issues of the magazine to create a free online library.

Stay safe!
 Mia Feroletto

A Note from Guest Editor Brenda Zlamany

The circus first captured my imagination in early childhood when I learned my ancestors on my father's side, itinerant performers who toured eastern Europe in the 19th century. As I grew into adulthood, I regularly followed circuses from around the world, including the politically oriented Circus Amok from New York City, Atlanta's African-American-owned UniverSoul Circus, and Quebec's famed Cirque du Soleil.

Later, I rediscovered my early fascination with the circus when I introduced my young daughter to its joys. As a single parent much in need of a vacation that included babysitting, I found that Club Med offered a school with Cirque du Soleil on various Caribbean Islands (often at a greatly reduced rate in the off-season). It became a regular vacation for my daughter and me, and we developed friendships with the performers we saw there year after year.

And in 2003, at a time when there were still very few activities for parents with young children in the industrial section of Williamsburg, Brooklyn where I've lived since 1984,

Elizabeth Streb opened STREB Lab for Action Mechanics in the neighborhood. It was exciting to regularly attend their performances and to move from spectator to participant by taking classes at their school with my daughter.

During the pandemic lockdown, I drew on these experiences as well as my time spent with the skilled performers and gymnasts in the World Nomad Games in Saudi Arabia, to begin a long-term painting project inspired by the circus. I was thrilled when Mia Feroletto invited me to be the Guest Editor of an issue on the circus where I could focus on my own circus series and solicit articles on the theme from a variety of writers. I welcomed the opportunity to explore the subject more deeply, and after an extended period of isolation in my studio, I longed for the chance to share my circus project.

Within these pages, I've included the voices of choreographers, creators, circus performers, and the artists they inspire. You'll find writing about both historical and contem-

porary circus in a variety of mediums and approaches, including poetry.

Barry Schwabsky was the first person I approached for a contribution to this issue. During the lockdown, I regularly emailed him images of my *Circus Mask Portraits* while they were still in process, and he emailed me his poems and words of encouragement. I decided to ask him if he might happen to have a circus poem in him, and to my surprise and delight, he wrote *Meditations of a Mask*, a nine-part poem loosely based on my *Mask Portraits*.

Paging through curator Donna Gustafson's beautiful book on the theme, *Images from the World Between: The Circus in Twentieth-Century American Art*, I discovered Rhona Bitner's striking circus photographs. So, when I contacted Gustafson to request an article and she proposed writing about Bitner's photographs, I was overjoyed.

In my studio, I curate an inspiration wall with pictures of circus paintings from different periods. I am always curious what other painters might see in the works that are important to me, so I offered several artists the opportunity to choose from a selection of paintings on my wall on which to reflect. Julie Heffernan selected the Goya *Stilts*, Barbara Friedman picked Walter Kuhn's clown portraits, and Eric Aho wrote about Katherine Bradford's wonderful circus paintings. However, Camilla Fallon went beyond my wall and expressed interest in writing about Oskar Schlemmer and his *Triadic Ballet* instead, an opportunity to think about something new!

I also wanted to include the point of view of performers, so I approached the STREB organization and Mia Feroletto interviewed Bobby Hedglin-Taylor and Cassandre Joseph as well as arranged for her in depth conversation with Elizabeth Streb whose work she had followed for almost four decades. The STREB performance space had been so important to my daughter and me in the early days of Williamsburg, and clown Deborah Kaufmann. Mia Feroletto learned more about STREB in her series of interviews, and with the help of Max Schumann of Printed Matter, she also interviewed Peter Schumann, founder and director of Bread and Puppet Theater. Meanwhile, Deborah Kaufmann explored the art of clowning and how clowns use their art to serve the community.

After a long period of painting in total isolation, it was exciting to invite two very different art writers for separate masked studio visits. David Cohen, a dear friend and longtime supporter of my work, wrote a lively and epic piece that masterfully synthesizes different periods of art and influences in my work. Phoebe Hoban's insightful article gives the reader a peek into my studio and a closer look at four of my paintings.

I'd like to thank Mia Feroletto for providing me with the opportunity to bring this wonderful material together in one place and for the additions she brought to our list of contributors, and all of the contributors to this issue who gener-

ously shared their ideas, images, content, and time during a difficult wave of the pandemic. Though the physical circus may not be available to all of us now, I invite you to discover its marvels through the art and words of this issue. And we hope that we will be able to enjoy the circus in person again soon!



Brenda Zlamany, *World Upside Down* (detail)



Brenda Zlamany in Saudi Arabia

Sand Dunes and Stilts

By Brenda Zlamany

During the lockdown of March 2020, I turned for inspiration to the circus, with its dynamism, drama, alienation, solitude, joy and melancholia. Like many artists before me, including Watteau, Goya, Seurat, Beckman and Picasso, I found the circus to be an apt metaphor for challenging times. Matisse worked on his lively cut-paper designs for *Jazz* while convalescing alone in bed after a life-threatening operation. In my isolation, I was similarly drawn to the circus's many contrasting qualities—enchantment and repulsion, freedom and danger, mastery and vulnerability—and I found pleasure and expression in its exoticism and visual dynamics in an uncertain, lonely, and dark time.

Only a year earlier, I was living and working in a real circus environment in the Dahna Desert of Saudi Arabia, surrounded by hundreds of performers from around the world. During my one-month residency at the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival, along with an international cohort of other artists, I painted images of prize-winning camels for an exhibition there and also made sketches, took photos, and recorded videos of the circus performers.

When I returned to Brooklyn, I temporarily set aside this material to work on *Climate in America*, a portrait project that involved traveling to locations in the United States undergoing effects of climate change. However, when New York City went into lockdown, I had to put this project on hold. Having stockpiled art supplies for my isolation in my Brooklyn studio, I decided to use up a dozen stretchers that had fortuitously been gifted to me by the painter John Zinser when he moved studios the previous month. Some were large, over ten feet (the perfect height of canvas for *Stilt Walkers*), while others were unusual rectangles.

As the headlines cycled from COVID-19 to racial injustice and the Black Lives Matter movement, to the fires on the West Coast and other environmental catastrophes, my feelings of isolation and anxiety transformed into anger and a need to be heard. I began looking through my collection of sketches, photos, recordings, and notes from the camel festival; these circus images became pliable parts that I could combine to address feelings, search for truths in an uncertain world, and create allegories.

I made the circus project big, frantically starting new paintings before finishing previous ones to keep from obsessing and to gain emotional stability. The scale and detail kept me engaged, and the colors and patterns seduced me. Rendering drapery and pattern filled long hours in isolation but, more importantly, provided moments of beauty in a dark time.

I identified with the fragility of the performers, who live on the edge. In *Stilt Walkers*, a family portrait, I've included my-

self and my daughter, Oona. Two stilt walkers are in the foreground, one interrogating the viewer while the other looks down. Oona walks away confidently. In profile, I look into the distance, hiking up my pant legs; I have not yet figured out how to balance. *World Upside Down* depicts an inverted acrobat suspended above a huge swath of drapery that fills the canvas with deep cadmium red. *Circus Performers: Father and Son* portrays a fellow resident from the camel festival: a gentle giant from Kyrgyzstan with a disfigured skull, looks down as his son, introspective and innocent, faces the future.

My group of nine *Circus Mask Portraits*, based on the enigmatic masks of the African dancers at the camel festival, became especially relevant because the wearing of masks was politicized in the pandemic. The subjects appear to writhe and push up against the edges of rectangles that barely contain them. In these paintings, I meticulously painted nine faces and then carefully obliterated them by painting a white mesh on top of each. Although this act was an expression of my frustration as a portraitist who enjoys working from direct observation and no longer had access to faces, it was also a paradoxically calming ritual. *The Young Acrobat* is a more optimistic image. It was completed recently, when COVID-19 appeared to be receding and we were adjusting to and even beginning to thrive in the "new normal." The young subject triumphantly balances in a *passé relevé* while his rabbit, a symbol of luck and prosperity, looks away.

I have just begun sketches for *Humanity*, a six-by-eighteen-foot-long triptych in which a procession of diverse circus characters march purposely toward an unknown endpoint. In this ambitious composition, I will explore the need to move forward regardless of the destination. The detail and complexity of *Humanity* will provide a safe haven to immerse myself in during the upcoming months as the threat of another lockdown looms, and the large cast of characters will prevent loneliness in the pending isolation of my studio.

The circus is all-encompassing, and it continues to be a reliable source of inspiration for me in this troubled time. The bounty of imagery that is at once malleable and celebratory, poignant yet lavish, allows me to create new metaphors, make sense of complicated emotions, experience moments of beauty, and address a confusing and ever-changing world. It is a privilege to retreat to the circus.

Photographs by Brenda Zlamany



DOMESTIC RESURRECTION CIRCUS: SMALL TOWN, BIG STORY IN GLOVER, VERMONT

By Mia Feroletto

For more than 50 years, Peter Schumann and Bread and Puppet Theater have been providing the “wake up scream that humanity needs.” Perhaps we all need to scream louder. I had the privilege of talking to Peter about the founding of Bread and Puppet Theater in New York City back in 1961 and the five decades that followed.

Peter Schumann and his wife Elka moved to the lower East Side of Manhattan in 1961. Merce Cunningham and John Cage were friends who were teaching workshops in dance and choreography for those who were highbrow and educated within the field. Peter’s goal for Bread and Puppet was to bring art to everyone, not just the elite.

The Schumanns lived in a predominantly Ukrainian neighborhood shared with many Spanish-speaking families with children. Peter began creating street shows of movable performances that could easily allow the performers to run away from the cops and avoid arrest for performing without a license. His audiences began to grow and attract larger crowds within a relatively short time.

Working regularly with items readily available such as cardboard boxes and sticks, Peter began to create what he refers to as “crankies,” painted newsprint scrolls that told stories, which more often than not were political in nature. Topics included voter registration, poor housing conditions,

and housing rights as well as the surveillance state. As their audiences grew, so did the size of the puppets. The streets of New York City could accommodate massive puppets set against the backdrop of sky-high buildings. The juxtaposition of the two was provocative in many ways and inspiring, especially for those raised in the idealistic 1960s.

In 1982, the Greenwich Village Peace Center organized activities against nuclear proliferation. It became easy to find people who wanted to be inside of the puppets and protest with the power of art rather than simply hand out pamphlets. For the protest against the Nuclear Arms Race that started at the United Nations, Bread and Puppet Theater had 1500 people in masks and as puppets on parade. I lived in Manhattan during this time period and remember the thrill of seeing these larger than life puppets animated and filled with personality and strength. This was not art for the institutions but art for the common man, collaborating with real people to address problems and concerns in their lives and the lives of their children.

Peter Schumann may be the most prolific artist who ever lived. If you visit the Bread and Puppet Museum in Glover, Vermont, your senses will be overwhelmed by the depth and breadth of individual beings who inhabit the Shaker barn built in 1865. They all contain psychic powers and their own

unique personalities. Combine their creation with the countless books and paintings that Peter has created throughout his more than 50-year career, and the number is staggering. He and his family moved to Glover in the early 1970s. There they became a fixture at local events. I have seen him dressed as Uncle Sam and walking on 10 ft. stilts during the Sheffield Field Day celebration in 2006. This is one way for us to thumb our noses at Uncle Sam and make fun of him at a time that is difficult to support some of the actions of our government.

Thousands and thousands of people visit Glover each summer to watch and participate in the Bread and Puppet productions held in their natural amphitheater across the road from their house and museum.

Peter has shared with me and in other interviews that Bread and Puppet pursues “the lyrical concentration point of any abstract and intense style of thinking that you might do publicly.” Bread and Puppet has become the true chronicler of our day. If there is a present day political issue that needs attention, rest assured that Bread and Puppet will be incorporating it into its theater work. The puppets report the daily news while our media outlets lie by omission rather than report the truth.

We cannot discuss Bread and Puppet without talking about the bread that is made and shared at every performance. Baking 30 loaves at a time, Peter bakes the brown bread of his native Germany in a hand-built oven fired by wood from his property to provide nutrition and sustenance to the Bread and Puppet audience. The entire organization promotes a sustainable, wholesome way of living, supporting gardening, fresh foods, and creativity through working with the items we have around us in everyday life. It is refreshing and inspiring to see how each part supports the whole in the Bread and Puppet community. Any and all materials can be turned into art to feed the soul in the same way as Peter’s bread feeds the body.

Breaking bread with strangers is a way of making friends from all over the world and spreading the joy, good cheer and informational sharing that happens in Glover every summer when the puppets come out to perform. Vermonters know they are special because they have this extraordinary organization as a neighbor. They also know that as a state, a rather remarkable group has assembled to help inspire and, hopefully, change the world. Peter Schumann and his family, both biological and artistic, are part of an amazing group of individuals who have migrated to or been



Peter and Elka Schumann





Peter Schumann, *Chair Series*

born in Vermont. Perhaps it is the trees or the extraordinary sky, or maybe the mountains. It could be the water. We are lucky to have friends and neighbors such as Will Allen, who lead the way for GMO labeling laws in the state, or journalist Chris Hedges, who was born here. Senator Bernie Sanders has called Vermont home for decades and inspired a nation with his two presidential runs. Bill McKibben founded 350.org in Greensboro, Vermont and continues to be a leader in the environmental movement at home and abroad. Bread and Puppet Theater and Peter Schumann and his late wife Elka fit right in.

The last thing Peter Schumann shared with me during our conversation is that Bread and Puppet Theater has the added advantage of the clouds in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. The clouds there are like no others I have seen. They seem to go on for days and are formed from what ap-

pears to be voluminous, billowing cotton balls. Peter said that Bread and Puppet Theater has the most extraordinary prop in the world, the clouds in the sky. Imagine his beautiful handmade, enormous puppets surrounded by the colors of Vermont—green and blue—and these cloud forms whose shapes are so defined they could have been made in Peter's studio, free in the open air. Now, that is living!

And for those who would like to see Bread and Puppet Theater and Bernie Sanders back in 1994, when they sent people off into space from the town of Glover, Vermont, here is the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeUsROaQOBg>

They were light years ahead of Jeff Bezos.



Rhona Bitner's Photographs of the Circus

By Donna Gustafson

I first encountered Rhona Bitner's photographs of the circus in the late 1990s when I was researching circus images for an exhibition that I organized titled *Images from the World Between: The Circus in Twentieth-Century American Art*. That show was a wide-ranging exploration of artists who saw the circus as a space of art, beauty, terror and metaphor. The title referenced Franz Kafka's ideas about the circus as "a world between". The idea of the circus as a space between here and somewhere else appealed to me because it seemed to encompass the exotic strangeness of the circus and its longevity. My exhibition, which included an installation of 25 photographs by Rhona Bitner and work by Polly Apfelbaum, Alexander Calder, Charles Demuth, Walker Evans, Walt Kuhn, and Bruce Nauman, among others, travelled to the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut (where in 1946 a tragic fire in the Big Top nearly destroyed the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus), the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida (winter quarters for many circuses in the twentieth century), and the Austin Museum of Art in Texas. I mention these geographical markers because it is important to remember the long history of the circus, even in the United States, and its popular appeal. This essay gives me the opportunity to remember my immersion in the circus and its history, and to look more deeply at Rhona Bitner's work.

A photographer, Bitner divides her time between New York and Paris. Her conceptual projects are clearly defined and carefully structured. Acknowledging the role of theater in everyday life and using the viewfinder of the camera to set the boundaries of her metaphorical stage, she investigates experience, the seen and unseen, and the settings that frame our activities and our stories. Using a camera, she probes history, memory and emotional experience—those unseen things we take home from our trips to the theater, concert stage, circus, ballet. These include the experience of the marvelous (Circus), the reverberations of sound in an empty concert hall (Listen), the mask (Clown), anticipation (Stage), and the physical exertions of a ballet dancer (Pointe). She began to think about the camera in very simple terms, making a conceptual leap that connected the black box construction of the camera to the black box of the theater. The connection between the camera and the theater led to an

exploration of the images found in the theater—the performers—and the image of the performer that was captured by the black box (camera). Serendipity led her to the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus at Madison Square Garden in New York City in 1990 where she made her first attempts at photographing the circus. After spending some time perfecting her technique with the camera and in the

Acknowledging the symmetry between theater and photography—in both, one enters a black box and an image appears—and understanding that both the stage and the lens act as apertures through which the greater world is observed and interpreted, my work uses the theatrical space to consider a shared human experience.

—Rhona Bitner, 2020

darkroom, she embarked on a serious engagement with the subject. She photographed circuses and circus festivals in New York and Paris from 1993-2001, resulting in a collection of 237 images from 76 shows. These are not documentary photographs of the circus. She did not go backstage, set up her camera at ringside, or enter the private spaces of the circus performers. She photographed from the seats—capturing the experience of the circus as a member of the audience during public performances.

Much of the critical dialogue around photography turns on questions of truth. Is a photograph staged or authentic, is the photograph a document or a metaphor? Those questions do not really come into play when writing about Bitner's photographs of the circus because her images are fully invested in the experience of the circus

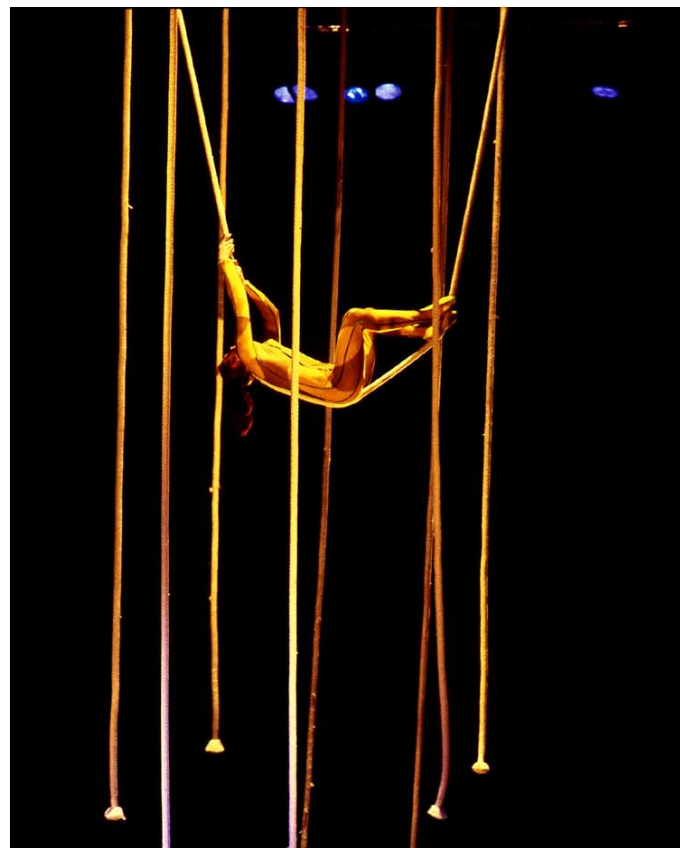
as a space of the marvelous. They document the circus as a metaphorical world that only exists in extraordinary moments: an acrobat seemingly defying the laws of physics (fig. 1), a clown rushing through an imaginary doorway, a young woman keeping a hundred hula hoops in motion (fig. 2), and a juggler balancing too many wooden chairs to be physically possible (fig. 3). For many people, including Bitner, the circus is a microcosm of the world. The acrobats are the artists and dreamers, the clowns are the rest of us who fall, get up, fall again, and get up again. Bitner's photographs are among my favorite images of the circus because they encompass all the anarchic possibility of the circus. Their intimate scale, their focus on a single act, and the darkness that isolates each performer as if alone in the world suggest to me a poetic view of human nature, an understanding of the frailty and courage of everyday acts, the recognition of the absurd, and a powerful metaphor for the human condition. Profound, beautiful and timeless, these photographs leap beyond the



circus into the unknown and the undiscovered.

Unusual among her own theatrical explorations, the circus photographs depend on individual performers. In her other series, it is the space or the curtain or the ballet shoe that occupies the camera. In addition, the circus photographs remove the individual performer from the spectacle and most of the visual clues that suggest the ring, the circus, the tent. The never-wavering focus on the performer reminds us that singular feats of skill, strength and daring have always been the heart of the circus. Short acts, announced by the Ringmaster and brought out into the ring (the stage) and performed in sequence, build the audience's anticipation and excitement. Each act has its own internal rhythm that builds suspense, then resolves itself with an dramatic finale, leaving the audience primed for the next cycle of mounting excitement, resolution and return to a state of anticipation. The catharsis that accompanies the end of each performer's return to center stage for a bow and applause is one of the satisfactions of the circus. There is always, however, the *frisson* of real danger in the circus—a trapeze artist must not slip, a bareback rider must not fall, a knife thrower must always hit his or her mark. Real and imagined danger hovers around many performances at the circus and Bitner's photographs of single, fragile figures performing alone in a dark and unarticulated space capture that existential threat. In so doing, they also capture a moment of high drama that will live in the memories of those who partake fully in the illusions of the circus. These photographs of circus performers at work are distillations of experience—that of the performer combined with those who follow his or her progress illuminated by a beam of light in a space of darkness. The intimate scale of the photographs is comparable to memories, not stories, but moments and images. (fig. 4)

It is hard for me to imagine what people who have not seen a circus would make of these photographs. There is more than a hint of the absurd in these images. Because I have spent time at the circus, these photographs trigger memories of my experience as a spectator. Another question might be: what do these photographs mean to those without memories of being at the circus? What would one make of the exaggerated gestures frozen by the camera, the quick movements blurred, tightropes and ladders unmoored from gravity and seemingly floating in a black void (fig. 5), not to mention the absurdity of reading while blindfolded, (fig. 6) or hanging upside-down. There is an appealing sense of absolute freedom in these small moments without context, without narrative, without supporting actors. Without knowledge of the circus (if that is even possible), I would imagine that these photographs of figures engaged in what looks to be farcical and even irrational acts would remind us all of the absolute importance of those leaps of faith that result in the unattainable and the marvelous. Perhaps that is part of the appeal. Bitner's photographs show us that circus performers are artists in a world of their own invention.



Rhona Bitner, *Trapeze*



Rhona Bitner, *Hoops*- fig. 2



Rhona Bitner, *Chairs* - fig. 3

Circus Cycle: Don't Send in the Clowns

By Phoebe Hoban

The circus, with its strange mix of the sinister and the magical, has always exerted an eternal appeal for both children and adults. Even today, stripped of its not-so-wild animals—the well-trained elephants and the lions tamed by the ringmaster's whip—the drama of the circus, part freak-show, part theater, still maintains its magnetic pull, continuing to inspire artists of all stripes.

Think of the circus, and half-a-dozen iconic art-historical

images instantly spring to mind. There is, of course, Calder's delightful mechanical toy-like *Cirque*, (1931) complete with movable performers—from contortionists to sword swallowers—now permanently ensconced at the Whitney.

In Paris, the circus attracted a host of artists over the years, including Picasso, whose painting, *Les Saltimbanques* (*Family of Saltimbanques*), (1904-1906) shows a strangely isolated, static group, including a tall harlequin, his pensive, seat-

ed wife, three costumed children and a Falstaff-like clown. Picasso strongly identified with members of the Cirque Médrano, which he and his coterie frequently attended. Other Picasso circus paintings include three from 1905: *Six Circus Horses with Riders*; *Juggler with Still Life*; and saddest of all, *The Death of Harlequin*.

Before that, in the late 1880s, the circus inspired half-a-dozen or more famous French artists, and The Cirque Fernando, a highly popular extravaganza in Montmartre, repeatedly appears in a number of their works. Toulouse Lautrec's *At the Circus, Fernando and the Rider*, (1888) portrays a flamboyantly attired female rider (reminiscent of his Moulin Rouge women) astride a horse circling the ring. George Seurat's *Le Cirque*, (1888-1891), one of several well-known circus paintings he did of *Le Cirque Fernando*, perfectly captures the dizzying motion of a female rider balanced on one foot astride a prancing white horse, a nimble acrobat tumbling behind her. Renoir also tried his hand at circus imagery, painting a pair of young sibling acrobats, *Acrobats at the Cirque Fernando* (1879). Degas' *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*, (1879), is a classic in this genre, depict-

ing the dancery form of Miss La La, dangling from a slender rope and suspended only by her teeth.

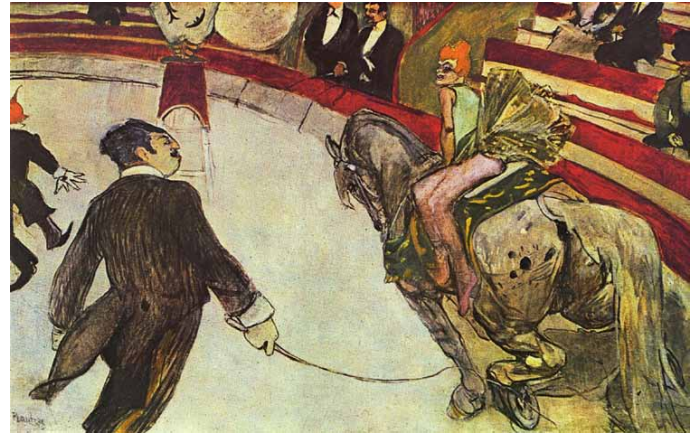
Then there is Goya's circus art, which ranges from his lively 1791 painting, *The Stilt Walkers*, to his austere circus etchings, including a regal queen and a dignified elephant, which are in a class all their own. His renowned "Los Disparates," cycle displays a pointedly political perspective. *Una Reina Du Cirque*, otherwise known as *A Circus Queen*; *Timely Absurdity* (c. 1820) has been interpreted as a comment on class: the privileged queen on her pivoted toe atop a horse forced to navigate a tightrope, for instance. Other images in the series include *Aveugle enleve sur les* (1867,) a blind musician clutching his guitar and pinioned on the horns of a bull. There is also the solitary elephant facing a foursome of cowering Moors, one of whom proffers a book and a bell-studded harness, (*Animal Folly*, from *Disparate de bestia*), also known as *Otros leyes por el pueblo*, (1867) which translates as "Other laws for the people."

While the one-time popular euphemism "Running away to the circus" is no longer in colloquial use, modern-day artists are still entranced by the circus as a creative escape. So it is



Picasso, *Les Saltimbanques*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Family_of_Saltimbanques.JPG#/media/File:Family_of_Saltimbanques.JPG



Lautrec, *At the Circus, Fernando and the Rider*



Seurat, *Le Cirque*
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georges_Seurat,_1891,_Le_Cirque_\(The_Circus\)_oil_on_canvas,_185_x_152_cm](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georges_Seurat,_1891,_Le_Cirque_(The_Circus)_oil_on_canvas,_185_x_152_cm)

that Brenda Zlamany, a highly-skilled portrait painter, came to develop her own series of circus works. As part of her ongoing Itinerant Portraitist project, first begun in 2011, in which she traveled to far-flung locations to chronicle their inhabitants, Zlamany went to the King Abdul Aziz Camel Festival in Saudi Arabia in 2019. While camels were the purported focus of the trip, Zlamany found herself living in what she describes as a "circus environment," where there were "circuses and artists and performers from all over the world."

As source material for future work, she made thousands of images of these itinerant people. She, like Picasso, was drawn by their often poignant presence when they were not performing—when the act was dropped, and they were for a time unmasked. "It's the people behind the performance as opposed to the performance," she says. "I am less interested in what they present to the viewer than in what I catch when nobody's looking."

With the advent of the covid pandemic, Zlamany turned to this rich cache of sketches and photographs for her next painting series. "I wanted to revisit this material for several reasons," she recalls. "One was because I was stuck in lockdown, I couldn't have live models, and I had all this wonderful source material. And also, the images were super-detailed with drapery and pattern, and it was great for me to have some busy work—it was a good way to deal

with anxiety." And then there was the nature of the subject matter itself. "I have always loved the circus, because historically, there's a kind of melancholia associated with it."

Several of the subjects of her circus paintings sport jester's caps, but Zlamany stayed away from the clichéd image of the classic clown, although clowns clearly embody both the circus's comedy and tragedy—and even its sometimes terrifying edge. (Picture Cindy Sherman's clowns.) Also notable is the fact that the artist, who began her career as a still-life painter, has created images that are minus the blur of motion typical of many circus paintings. Like Picasso, she has, to a certain extent, frozen her performers in the off-stage, high-wire act of being themselves.

Interestingly, Zlamany started the series with a circus-oriented portrait of herself and her daughter, Oona, inspired in part by Goya's *The Stilt Walkers*. "This is the family portrait," she explains. Entitled *Stilt Walkers Family Portrait #3*, (2020-21) it is "about having to adjust. I am introspective, but Oona is just moving on. She's got her stilts and she is coping in the way that a kid would at that age. She's on to the next thing, on with her life. Whereas I'm not sure how it's going to work



Degas, *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edgar_Degas,_Miss_La_La_at_the_Cirque_Fernando,_1879.jpg



Goya, *Una Reina Du Cirque*
<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/una-reina-del-circo-disparat-puntual-francisco-de-goya/1wH6uxoLR5cmHA>
 out for me."

The large-scale painting, (120 by 60 inches) features two performers from Kyrgyzstan, their nationality telegraphed by the hat sported by the figure in the foreground, along with Zlamany and child. In it, Zlamany, the only character not on stilts, is dwarfed not just by the two professional stilt walkers, but by her tall, agile daughter, quite comfortable on her borrowed stilts and seemingly about to simply stride off canvas.

The two performers are dressed in brightly colored, boldly patterned circus costumes; Oona is strangely elegant in tails and a top hat. Meanwhile, Zlamany herself is dressed like a jester, and is shyly holding up her ballooning polka dot pantaloons as if they are a petticoat. It's as if her daughter has been anointed by a new world order, but she has been left behind, the helpless child.

Behind them, the background, dotted with a few tents, is a pretty, placid blue 2019 sky, not showing a hint of the "new normal" yet to come. The colors are rich, inviting, and the performer with the hat, alive to the moment, like Oona, seems to be introducing the cast of characters. His counterpart, who, like Zlamany, is wearing a jester's cap, hangs back, looking down at the ground, both dejected and distraught. A



Brenda Zlamany, *Circus Performers: Father and Son*, detail



Brenda Zlamany, *Circus Performers: Father and Son*, 2020-21, Oil on linen, 72 x 46 in.

tentative smile plays on Zlamany's lips. The canvas contains a potent mix of innocence and foreboding.

Explains Zlamany, "I loved the Goya *Stilts*, so I was looking at that. To me, this painting is very much about the early pandemic. You had to learn something new. And here walking away completely confidently is Oona is on these stilts. Everyone's on their stilts, and here I am trying to adjust to this world. I am the forlorn character, and I don't even have stilts to get on and I am not able to do it. The painting is about us and about balancing." (Zlamany's self-image as a harlequin/jester is also perhaps a passing homage to Antoine Watteau's *Gilles*, widely interpreted as a self portrait.)

The second painting in the series, *World Upside Down*, done when the pandemic was peaking, features a Cirque du Soleil contortionist that Zlamany met when she and her daughter were on vacation at a resort that offered circus classes. The composition consists of a cruciform. In it, a pliant young woman is hanging upside down, legs splayed across the top of the shape of the cross, feet bound to the scaffold, arms and hands folded behind her head. Draped



Brenda Zlamany, *Circus Performers: Father and Son*, (detail)

below her is a voluminous crimson curtain, a gorgeous—and terrifying—sea of red. “I started feeling like the world was turned upside down,” the artist frankly admits. “This was done in the period where there were ambulances passing through the night. It’s very much about death, and all the anxiety and the chaos.”

At the same time, the painter took obvious pleasure in creating the composition and palette of the richly hued tour de force. “What I really wanted to do was a red painting,” she says. “I was thinking of Ellsworth Kelly. And it’s very rare that you get to use cadmium red out of a tube for most of the painting. At the same time, I was thinking of crucifixes, because I grew up with a lot of Catholic imagery, and I often return to this shape during moments of crisis or trauma.”

The third painting in the series, *Circus Performers: Father and Son*, (2020-21) is a striking—and deliberately disturbing—image of a large, stocky man, presumably a sideshow act due to his strange scalp deformity, and his perfect little son; a kind of circus spin on *Beauty and the Beast*. Says Zlamany, “I was very inspired by Picasso’s *Father and Son*, with an enormous father and a little boy. And I always loved the contrast of these two.”

“The painting portrays one of my fellow residents at the camel festival, who I guess had a condition of the head. He was a traditional circus sideshow act, but he had a beautiful son. And something about this spoke to me about Covid, because I felt that there was a kind of innocence and beauty to the boy, looking out into an uncertain future and, the poignancy of this guy who was kind of an elephant man. Because I was feeling that in my own relationship with my daughter, she had a completely different take on the world, as someone who was just starting her life, compared to me. All I felt was grief and loss. But she is someone who is going to have to figure out how to be positive in the world she is being given.”

The father, his full height constricted by the top of the canvas, bizarre head bowed, towers above his tiny son. He looks simultaneously weighted down by his own state and the state of the world, while his son’s small feet have been cropped out of the bottom of the canvas, as if, like Oona in the *Family Portrait*, part of him is already well on its way. Zlamany’s keen eye for composition is clearly on display; the grotesque cranial swirls of the performer’s head mirror the



Brenda Zlamany, *Stilt-Walkers (Family Portrait #3)*, 2020-21. Oil on linen, 120 x 60 in. (detail)

ornamental pattern of his belt, once again evoking a kind of *Beauty and the Beast* imagery.

As Zlamany explains of her choices in composing the piece, “I emphasized his head by enlarging it a bit. I was also thinking of Lucian Freud’s paintings of Leigh Bowery, this colossal guy. I wanted the father’s figure to be compressed, really squeezed into the rectangle, so I painted it without any space above him. And I also wanted to have this decorative

space between his crotch and the image of his son. And then I cropped the boy’s feet, because I wanted the boy to be in our world.”

The cruciform appears again in the buoyant *Young Acrobat* (2021), the most recent painting in the circus series. “When I was working on this composition, I was thinking about my childhood and how much time I spent on my knees, praying and doing penance in front of various cruciforms. So the



Brenda Zlamany, *Young Acrobat*, 2021, Oil on linen, 72 x 66 in.

image of the Christ figure hanging is a key image in times of trouble for me. In difficult times, we all return to our roots, and for me, my childhood roots are the crucifix images I had hanging in my bedroom. It's the earliest image of meaning for me." By far the most hopeful painting, it was created when the vaccines became available, and for the first time, there was a sense of a light at the end of the seemingly endless pandemic tunnel. The young ballet dancer, just 14 years old, is elevated in a classic *releve* position. "I just felt like we were in this positive time where things were working, and somehow this position was a sign of that." Once again Picasso provided a powerful reference, with his *Young Acrobat* (1905), his *Seated Harlequin with Red Background* (1905) and his *Harlequin and Blue Period* (1901).

And, although, like the contortionist in *World Upside Down*, the boy's stance forms an obvious crucifix, the girl is bound to the cross, her feet tightly wrapped, while the young acrobat is on tiptoe, elevated and free. She is being pulled down by gravity, and he's metaphorically trying to fly. "This is such a hopeful painting. What a gesture, to spread your arms like that," exclaims the artist. "This is progress and this is where I thought we were going."

Painted near his balancing foot is his pet, a rabbit, symbol of prosperity and good luck. "This was pre-Omicron," the artist says. "It is a very optimistic painting, and I was looking at Picasso's blue painting, *The Young Acrobat*. I love the blue because it is a complement of the orange in the boy's strawberry-blonde hair and in the rabbit's fur."

Ziamany has managed to maintain some of that earlier hope. But, realizing that the pandemic journey is far from over, she has already begun the next painting in the circus series, an ambitious triptych that will be 18 feet long.

"Covid has been really freeing for me because I had to do more inventing since I don't have access to real things. No matter what is happening with Covid and with everything else we're dealing with, the circus allows me to examine it emotionally. It is a point of departure that enables me to explore my own feelings. This next painting includes a lot of figures from my source material, but I can also put in faces of people I know. I am getting my cues from Max Beckman paintings, because he is the master of the triptych. It's going to be called *Humanity*, and its going to have 15 or 20 circus characters that I've collected, all in elaborate costumes, just moving in the same direction towards a goal, just marching on."

Then the artist adds a final note, "There will be clowns in the triptych," she cautions, "And they might be scary."

The Precarious Joy of Katherine Bradford's Circus

By Eric Aho

I went to the circus just once as a kid, but I still remember it. It was like an imagination machine—a genuine tarpaulin Big-Top stretched high on poles tethered by heavy ropes thicker than my arms. Trying to take in the vaulted cathedral-like space made me dizzy. My head was still spinning when my parents took me to next week's mass in our modest local church; the familiar carved and painted angels became acrobats and the top-hatted ringmaster with outstretched arms morphed into the risen Christ plying his magic act. St. Francis's animals and birds preened and performed. St. Jerome's lion wasn't just sleepy; obviously he was exhausted after his third ring-of-fire act.

Katherine Bradford's painting is, broadly, a circus too. She's the white-haired, bespectacled ringmaster of paint-erly spectacles, and what fun it must be to make, to direct, these paintings! And the latest are her best and brightest to date. Daring players who fly easily through the air, her figures reach, grab and hold each other as if on a high wire. Strong-women and strong-men—strong-everybody—perform Bradford's balancing act of fun and hard work. As she tells it, her kids believed she might well have joined the circus (Bradford moved to NYC with her still young children to attend art school)—just that she didn't run away to do it. She ran toward art—to the miraculous freedom of painting—toward herself—and ultimately toward us. Bradford



Katherine Bradford, *Mother Joins the Circus*

easily links the freedom artists and circus performers share. "I love circus people, and like circus people we (artists) are paid to be ourselves," she told James Kalm recently. "We're paid to be freaks and to put on a show."

Bradford's pictures (made, it bears noting, during our own contemporary political circuses) are about painting and people, tensions and resolutions. Her figures push at each other and they draw each other near. Like humanity as a whole, they pile on one another and through their intersections, Bradford's performers enact the open puzzle of painting. There's no secret code or handshake required to enter these works—they're among the most generous invitations we're likely to encounter in contemporary painting.

At Bradford's Hall Foundation exhibition this past summer, I suddenly felt a little like I did at that church service years ago. Her works changed—frolic gave way to an inescapable piousness—her violet spoke volumes. It occurred to me that the arc of Bradford's painting career is itself a "circus." Her chromatic figures might have been stowaways on the ocean liners in her earlier paintings. Now, they're in procession coursing through the rich history of figurative painting replete with annunciations, lamentations, and depositions extending to a full range and pulse of feeling: rising, falling with joy and sorrow. There's even a Bradford pieta of sorts where we sit in "mother's" lap. It's wonderful to be welcomed by the holding, reaching, and touching (you can almost feel the rush of serotonin and dopamine) all bound by sacred color—violet, red and gold? Her pinks and turquoises resonate like Sassetta on a larger scale. These present-moment surfaces of high-tech acrylic reading thick and thin, shiny and matte, are masterful material riffs on the plasticity of painted space.

Bradford has glued square canvas scraps "in hopes that something interesting might happen" atop the figures in *Mother Joins the Circus* (Second Version), 2020. Such an in-the-moment studio decision re-enforces Bradford's canvases as sections excised from an actual circus tent (big-top tents require constant repair). The realism of the patches shakes out any whiff of cute—this is a serious, do-anything-it-takes business. In the first version of *Mother Joins the Circus* (2019) two figures carry another stretched long and horizontal across the space. Their arms double as hoops. The carried horizontal figure is gently restrained. She doesn't protest; she's part of the act. They slide through the painted space. Everyone has their own hoops to jump through, including single mothers who go off to art school and raise children while in the act.

Bradford's players are familiar even without recognizable features (the light glows too low for them). Faces and expressions are obscured as if glimpsed through a scrim of fabric and dust. Her huddled troupe is instead rendered radiant from within (like the magical Seurat Sideshow which she tells me is a favorite) and the result is an unexpected intimacy. We recognize Bradford's figures like old friends and loved ones espied at a distance. We know them by sense, by

feel, by shape. We even see ourselves in them—heck, we are them. So much so, we line up around the block for a peak into her big-top. The magic isn't entirely that of the paintings. The energy is ours too, as we anticipate being caught and held by a blurred, twice overpainted arm with funny fingers.

Who wouldn't want to run away to this circus where a spotlight shines on an orange horse trotting in the painterly flood of *Bareback Circus Riders* (2019)? Balancing on its back, two girls in tutus reach to support one another. The horse carries the girls. The orange carries the painting. We're carried, too, in precarious joy.



Katherine Bradford, *Bareback Riders*

Goya's *Stilts* Painting

By Julie Heffernan

When Goya's paintings aren't weird—*The Marquesa de Pontejos*—or brilliant—all his Black Paintings—they can sometimes be pro forma. Even, now and then, downright bad. And he painted at least 700 paintings, so within that lot, to my eye, there's more than one stinker. Despite the importance of bringing a hard-biting realism to the fore in all his work, if it weren't for his late paintings, he probably wouldn't have earned the status of Last Old Master, especially when compared to other Spanish Masters—Velazquez and Picasso mainly—whose shadows come close to eclipsing his. Where those two are svelte, Goya can be awkward. Where they woo, he shies. Where they ravish with elegance and innovation, Goya pulls inward. His backgrounds are often flat like stage sets, his compositions ordinary, downright dull at times—*The Virgin of Pilar*—o-y! *The Rape of Europa*—o-yay! Without his etchings he might've all but disappeared from history, like his friend and teacher Francisco Bayeu, whose sister Goya married. So many of Goya's portraits appear so incredibly awkward that it's hard to imagine his patrons, especially King Carlos III, being willing to hang some of them. And yet, hard worker that he was, he trusted what he saw. *Yo lo vi*. From those simple words, one senses the reportorial gusto Goya felt, that led to his greatness. Just the facts, ma'am. And with those facts well in hand, he scales the heights.

Stilts (1791-2) is one of those almost ignorable Goya paintings. One of the tapestry cartoons commissioned by Carlos III, it renders up almost no discussion at all when you google it, except for a cursory blurb from the Prado Museum where it hangs. Books on him that I've read—by Hughes, Licht, Klingender—have barely anything to say about *Stilts* either. Executed the same year as *The Straw Manikin*, which historians get a lot more excited by because it's another truly weird Goya, *Stilts* appears to defy, or maybe not warrant exegesis. And yet, with its compound or halved figures, its decorative negative spaces framing background characters in ways that make them seem ominous, cut off from the pleasures of the moment, *Stilts* is a harbinger of things to come.

Its main compositional device is a pronounced M, with the two points serving as thrusts for two *majos* on stilts, projecting them up high into the sky above the crowd, ostensibly to entertain a *maja* who looks on from her upper story window, and doesn't seem to care about their antics and whom they barely notice. The figures are framed against an almost white sky whose flatness serves a dual purpose, suggesting loftiness and nothingness at the same time, reflecting the vain hopes of any poor peasant. There's a playful atmosphere all around them: the legs of two buglers accompanying them

reinforce the fake legs of the stilts and appear to offer some stability to the M shape. And yet the children to their right and the crowd of cloaked shadowy figures to their left seem to close in on them, as if to push them off center and maybe off balance. The stiltsmen's arms flap about, back and forward like baby bird wings set loose from the stringencies of the composition; they create no implied linear connection with other elements of the composition, furthering the sensation of the stiltsmen being at sea. But more than that, right there in the foreground, right where the stilts' shadows point, is a wall, plunging down into a disturbingly dark abyss. It's the only really dark shape in the painting, other than the window and all the black hats that ricochet around the canvas like odd-shaped bullets. But black is where Goya lives, where he comes alive.

A long line of fairly uninspired portrait painting follows *Stilts*; it's not until 17 years later that *The Colossus* appears, alongside a bunch of still lifes with dead animals and then *Lazarillo de Tormes* and *Scene of kidnapping and murder*—and that's when Goya becomes GOYA. But that plunge into the abyss that made Goya more than a can of beans, it starts with *Stilts*.



Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, *Stilts*, 1791 - 1792.
Oil on canvas. Height: 268 cm; Width: 320 cm
Collection : Museo Nacional del Prado

<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/stilts/ddd97837-52bb-4f15-bd4d-68839c03779f>

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Strong Man, Clown and Dancer: From Goya's *Stilts* to Brenda Zlamany's *Masks* —The Circus as Metaphor and Motif

By David Cohen

The circus is both an arena and a cast. The circus is "the world between," as literary critic Heinz Politzer noted in response to Franz Kafka's two-sentence short story, "Up in the Gallery" (1919). Politzer's phrase furnishes the title of a landmark 2002 museum exhibition, curated by Donna Gustafson, a contributor to this special Circus issue of *New Observations*¹. Striking in Gustafson's revelatory survey of the motif in the work of 20th-century American artists is how the mystique of the circus almost takes second place to the gritty reality of the working lives of its performers. The true otherness of traveling troupes resides in the immense toil and dedication of those who must pull off moments of magic to captivate their audience. Other times, the subject itself was the rapport between audience and performer, providing acute instances for social observation. Invariably traveling, the circus is by nature a provisional space. And the men and women performing as stock characters and acts of the circus have lives independent of the ring as they rehearse, parade and showsow their talent, dressing up and dressing down, drumming up interest, crashing in spirit after the exhilarations and exertions of staying aloft a tightrope or losing themselves, becoming that essence of the other, the bearded lady, the fat baby, the strongman, the clown.

During the pandemic, Brenda Zlamany, sequestered in her studio, "ran away to join the circus" in imagination, joining a troupe of illustrious historic and contemporary artists drawn to the motif of circus in its widest definition, including *Commedia dell'arte* precursors, or street performers, indigenous or avant-garde. She was exposed to a circus environment in 2019 during a residency in Saudi Arabia where she was invited to record the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival in the Dahna Desert (specifically, to paint the camels). True to form, Zlamany also undertook one of her marathon "itinerant portrait" series of watercolors executed in short sessions from life utilizing a *camera lucida* for rapid observational accuracy. Working from a cross section of volunteers afforded Zlamany unique access and insight into Saudi society, breaking down barriers in a milieu uncomfortable with both representational art and with proactive women making it. Her direct observation of circus acts from across the globe gathered for the camel festival resulted in a stock of notes,

sketches, photographs and video clips that furnished a series that would surface a couple of years later in lockdown when, in the artist's words, "Like many artists before me, including Watteau, Goya, Seurat, Beckmann, and Picasso, I found the circus to be an apt metaphor for challenging times." The "mastery and vulnerability" of circus acts had become apposite to medical professionals and civilians alike negotiating the "uncertain, lonely, and dark time" of Covid.

This essay takes inspiration from that two-sentence short story by Kafka alluded to by Gustafson, via Politzer and his felicitous phrase, in the "World Between" exhibition. Kafka jolts his reader from one perspective to another as two men identify with the female equestrian act in a circus performance. In the first sentence, Kafka steeps us in romantic pity as a young man in the peanut gallery is convinced that the ringmaster is exploitative and cruel toward the trick rider and her steed. The story pivots in the second sentence, however, to an equally impassioned identification with the heroine by a paternalistic ring master, anything but the demonic imagining of the infatuated spectator. Critics have interpreted this slippage between audience and performer as indicative of the dichotomy of "being" and "appearance" (*sein und scheinen*) in German idealistic philosophy, a preoccupation across Kafka's oeuvre. Perhaps somewhat fancifully, I imagine for this essay contrasting ultimately conflicting stances towards Zlamany, the painterly trick rider in her three-ring circus of metaphor, motif and *modus operandi*. Zlamany's proximity to, or distance from, her elective troupe of transhistorical circus artists exposes fault lines of realist, romantic, symbolist, modernist and postmodern iterations of the genres of circus observation and interpretation, and ways of viewing her own project.

In her oil paintings, whether individual portraits, imaginary historic group portraits, or other figurative subjects, Brenda Zlamany has forged a highly wrought pictorial language of polished and distilled form. She is a realist who is at once highly competent within the idiom of photo naturalism and acutely aware of the artifice of a style she inhabits seemingly without affectation. She works from photographs, but to achieve the credibility and verisimilitude that photography has cultivated in the course of its history, she actually adopts anti-photographic (or at least pre-photographic) strategies to give body, realism and palpability to her forms, augmenting photographic records with surrogate life drawing, for instance, or devising color schemes that are independent of the photographed record and are more theatrically impactful, or giving luster and heft to compositions through

¹ Donna Gustafson with Essays by Eugene R. Gaddis, Ellen Handy, Karal Ann Marling, and Lee Siegel. *Images from The World Between: The Circus in 20th Century American Art*, 2002. For the American Federation of the Arts/ The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, touring Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut; John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida; Austin Museum of Art, Austin, Texas.



Katharine Bradford, *Circus Ring*



Katherine Bradford, *Circus Lady*

fastidious glazing—old masterly techniques for honing images. Like Goya and Manet, who both loom large as sources of inspiration for, respectively, her newfound circus subject and her long standing portrait practice, Zlamany shoots for a fusion of freshness and grandeur. Goya's *Stilts*, (1791-92), a preparatory sketch, now in the Prado, for a tapestry for the royal chambers at El Escorial, has become a touchstone for Zlamany since she observed acrobats on stilts in the Arabian desert. That Goya's street entertainers with their attendant musicians were serenading sequestered women in a high up keep, making a necessity of their humorous prosthetics, added significance to the image during lockdown, with Zlamany and her daughter isolating in their Brooklyn loft. (Her daughter, Oona, was an undergraduate at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia for much of this time.) In an image constructed from imagination and partially drawn and painted from life, *Stilt-Walkers (Family Portrait #3)*, 2020-21, Zlamany plays with scale, claustrophobia and verticality, weighting her image socially and emotionally with contrasting densities of costume and pose. She envisions herself as the sole figure among four with her feet on the ground, but dressed as a jester in quirkily alienated exoticism; by contrast, Oona in a black suit and top hat that pops amidst the cacophony of stripes and stars of the other three costumes strides forth on stilts with good cheer and confidence.

Goya's *Stilts*, like the *Commedia dell'Arte* images of Watteau, the other 18th Century artist cited by Zlamany, are examples from before the invention of photography of artists drawn to street entertainment. It is worth noting, incidentally, that the banishing of the *Commedia* from the royal court was a key moment in the rise of the modern circus as these beloved characters in their harlequin checks evolved into the acrobats and clowns of popular entertainment. And it is telling that the artistic styles that flourished in the wake of photography, Impressionism and Symbolism for instance, should find such rich subject matter in the circus in their search for subjects of modern life. Manet's florid (both in the sitter's complexion and the painter's touch) *Polichinelle*, (1873) is a *Commedia* subject, but for Zlamany, Manet's actors, singers, street musicians and even matadors, whether depicted in situ or isolated upon a stark, abstracted ground, were a crucial influence in her portrait style generally and her turn to circus themes in particular. By 1870, there were five permanently pitched circuses offering nightly performances in Paris. Degas and Renoir both portrayed performers at one of these, the *Cirque Fernando*, in 1879, Degas portraying the trapeze artist Miss La La clenching rope between her teeth (National Gallery, London) and Renoir showing the Wartenberg sisters about to resume juggling orange balls cradled by one of the girls or strewn about their feet (Art Institute of Chicago.) A reproduction of this Renoir was among the fifty works pinned to Zlamany's inspiration board in her studio during the painting of her ongoing circus series where it keeps company with both of the circus images from

the sparse oeuvre of Georges Seurat, his *Circus Sideshow*, (1888) and his last unfinished work, *Circus*, (1891), respectively in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. It might seem curious that such a "straight" realist as Zlamany should make Seurat a talisman of her circus iconography as Seurat pushes ethereality and stylization to an extreme, in these two images even within his already generally hermetic pointillist aesthetic. The later painting is based on a contemporaneous poster for the *Spectacle-Promenade de l'Horloge* by Jules Chéret, as well as an anonymous poster for another company, the Nouveau Cirque. Being an image wrought from other, overtly stylized images, makes the later painting an essay in accentuated artifice. The earlier work, a treatment of half-light of then novel gas illumination, explores an almost Byzantine flatness even as the artist's brush luxuriates in the tapering thighs of the trombonist and the rounded chest of Monsieur Corvi, the troupe's director, caught in profile. The idiosyncratic naturalism of Degas's Miss La La and Renoir's Wartenberg sisters and the synthetic, stylized flatness of Seurat's circus images might be said to come together in Zlamany's *World Upside Down*, 2020-21, whose pandemic message is, at it were, worn on its sleeve, of an acrobat tensed into a position of poise amidst billowing expanses of red cloth. The strange triangulation of the upper torso and lower limbs recalls, to my eye, the anatomical contortions found sometimes in Stanley Spencer's figures. The drape, looking like a large bodily organ, seems more naturalistic in rendering than the body it supports.

One of the most riveting American circus paintings, Everett Shinn's *The Tight Rope Walker*, (1924) sports the cover of *The World Between* catalogue. Shinn was a follower of Robert Henri and a member of The Eight, a group of realists contemporaneous with the Ash Can School. Members of these groups like George Luks, George Bellows and John Sloan, along with their contemporary Walt Kuhn, frequently turned to circus subjects in their strivings to represent modern American life. Like Kuhn—whose clown paintings would transcend social observation to mine depths of psychological identification—Shinn's affinity with the trapeze artist revealed a personal fascination with the circus. He designed sets for the 1929 movie *Polly of the Circus* and in 1937 contributed illustrations and an introduction to an edition of the 1880 children's adventure story *Toby Tyler; or, Ten Weeks with a Circus* by James Otis (later a Walt Disney film) in which Shinn recounts his own boyhood obsession with tightrope walkers. His 1924 painting, in the collection of the Dayton Art Institute, presents the acrobat as an ethereal, mesmeric elongation of lithe limb and taut muscle. His shimmering tunic and skin-tight body suit—redolent of the possessed dreamer in Henry Fuseli's iconic romantic painting *The Nightmare*, (1781)—rhymes with the nearby chandelier, a visual ancestor of the chandeliers in paintings of the 1980s by Ross Bleckner. The painting seems like a standout from

anything else by Shinn in both its modernity and its old masterly quality. The way the theatrical setting and awestruck audience are depicted with a combination of tonal restraint and flickering specificity recalls another master of vaudeville entertainment, Walter Sickert. Despite the chandelier and the setting, however, all focus is upon the body of the acrobat. Spandex might seem the only ostensible link between Shinn's *Tightrope Walker* and a commissioned portrait by Zlamany that she undertook in the knowledge that it could be considered part of her Circus series, a portrait of a teenage boy in ballet outfit she titles *Young Acrobat*. And yet the sense of the dancer's poise and aloofness, the Manet-like neutrality of the ground—but for the boy's pet rabbit at his feet—and the mildly anachronistic intimation of manhood in the stirrings of his bulge, allow this painting to transcend its subject, making it a kind of contemporary "swagger" portrait.

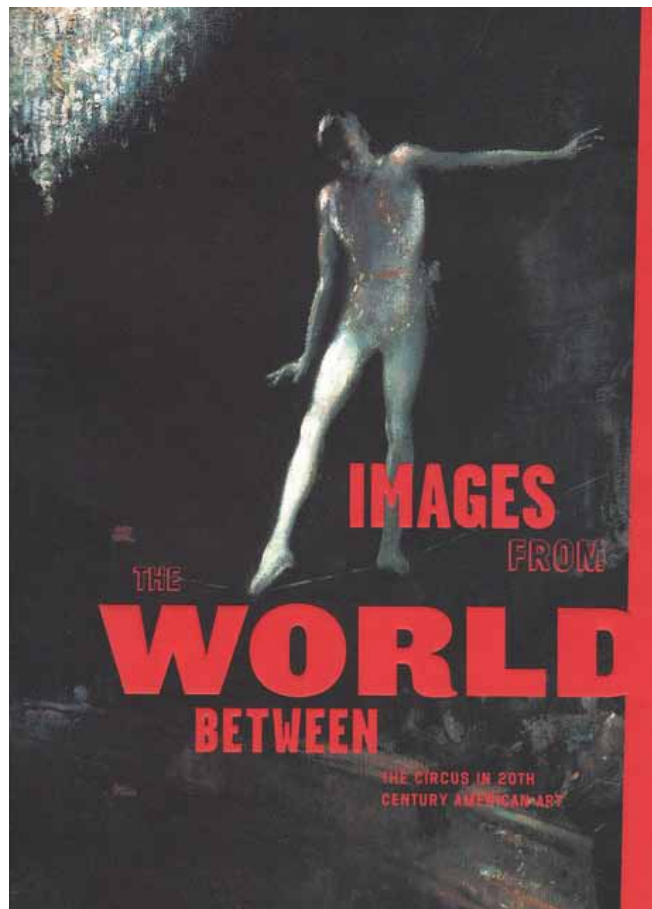
A more typical interpretation of the circus motif is Shinn's earlier *Strong Man, Clown and Dancer*, (1906), in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Almost like a police lineup, this presents the half-hearted, tawdry side of weary performers parading in a sideshow perhaps, the clown literally drumming up attention. This kind of procession, while acute in social observation, also relates to the motif of the ages of man, in the way the types of the circus are different faces of the institution's collective humanity. Individuals and types are at once specific and generic. A work Zlamany intends to title *Humanity*, now in its planning stage, will summate her interest in circus types in a procession, recalling the triumphs of Renaissance masters like Mantegna, in which different acts represent ages and moods.

One of Zlamany's most startling circus images to date is, arguably, *Circus Performers: Father and Son*, a work that epitomizes the collision, within the artist's aesthetic, of almost journalistic observation and symbolic image construction. As in *Stilt Walkers (Family Portrait)* 2020-21, differences in size between adult and child are accentuated within a radically vertical composition. The formats of both paintings, a 2:1 ratio in the stilt painting at 120 x 60 inches and something not far from that in this work at 72 x 46 inches, are striking and unusual; they were painted on eccentrically sized canvases donated to her by fellow artist John Zinsser when he was clearing out an old studio. The picture shows two generations of circus actors from Kyrgyzstan. The father suffers from the rare, largely benign medical condition of *cutis verticis gyrate* in which what looks like the brain underneath is embossed into the skull. Given Zlamany's interest in symbolic investment, it is almost uncanny that her subject should have such an emblematic condition, one that pushes the seat of intelligence through the surface of the epidermis. The father is bowing to adjust to the diminutive height of his child in such a way that the skull is more fully exposed, recalling something of the freak show aspect of earlier, pre-politically-correct circus sideshows that would exploit bodily

malformations to frivolous wonderment as in the case of Joseph Merrick, the Victorian victim of Proteus syndrome known as the "Elephant Man". Zlamany never discovered what act the Kyrgyzstanis actually performed, but noticed them in frequent parades, and the possibility that the victim was "performing" his disability, in line with the freak show tradition, is borne out by the fact that the troupe also included giants. The father wears heavily embroidered armbands whose pattern recalls his deformation while his stoop causes his shirt to buckle in a similar way.

As an individual with a highly particular physical characteristic, the Kyrgyzstani could be said to epitomize Zlamany's portrait ethic, to capture each person's uniqueness while also understanding them as a type. She is an heir of the great German photographer August Sander in this respect. Zlamany is perhaps best known for a highly particular genre of partly imagined historic group portraiture—in the tradition of the company portrait in which luminaries include Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, Eakins' *The Gross Clinic*, and Degas' *The Cotton Exchange, New Orleans*. Her two most celebrated commissions in this vein can be classed as company portraits at the service of institutional feminist revisionism: *Portrait of Yale's First Seven Women PhDs*, (2016), which hangs at Yale's Sterling Library, and *Portrait Depicting Five Pioneering Women Scientists from Rockefeller University*, (2021), which from April 2022 is scheduled to hang in their Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Hall. Responding to a very contemporary historical reckoning in the wake of the #MeToo movement, the works are intended to insinuate themselves into the historic fabric of their respective institutions in an historically appropriate way, as if to say that this is where they always belonged even though for some reason they weren't here. Zlamany researches each individual within her dynamic group composition with the thoroughness of a film production, creating likenesses to the extent that they are known from the moment of their breakthrough scholarship, with accurate costumes and scientific paraphernalia, weaving the figures together in a naturalistic credible relationship despite the evident artifice of bringing together women from discrete moments. Individuals and types, portraits and emblems, these women are players in a circus of scholarship.

In contrast with these high productions, historically constructed group portraits, Zlamany's other best-known genre is formed of the marathon watercolor portrait sets mentioned from her time in Saudi Arabia; each iteration is a highly concentrated focus on a given individual, dispatched *alla prima*, a handmade snapshot actually produced with a camera, albeit a *camera lucida* of the type to which she was introduced by longtime friend and mentor David Hockney. These "itinerant" portraits are produced on the fly in such locations as Taiwan where she worked with indigenous people, the Hebrew Home for the Aged in the Bronx where she portrayed sitters fast approaching 100, or even at home in Williamsburg where she set out to represent 366 contempo-



Everett Shinn, *The Tightrope Walker* (book cover)

aries on a daily schedule to form a deliberate contrast with the (leap) year in which she was to produce the Yale painting with all its historic research and fastidious layering.

Picasso's *Salimbanques*, the great theme of his Rose Period in which his youthful symbolist style was liberated from the lachrymose morbidity of his Blue Period, are a powerful point of reference for Zlamany with the "family values" of her *Father and Son* and *Stilt* paintings, inserting herself and her daughter into the circus theme such as Picasso's *Family of Saltimbanques*, (1907), at the National Gallery of Art encodes the artist's fatherly feelings towards a 13-year-old girl briefly adopted by his girlfriend at the time, Fernande Olivier, but soon sent back to the orphanage. (Perhaps Olivier intuited that her lover's feelings were not fatherly enough; decades later a successor of Olivier's would, after all, be a 15-year-old.) While partially basing the ensemble on individuals within *la bande à Picasso*, including Apollinaire, André Salmon and Max Jacob alongside himself, Olivier and the girl Raymonde, the traveling jugglers and acrobats and clowns of Picasso's paintings are also archetypal itinerant performers. The balance of real presences and generic types, of actual personalities and abstracted ciphers, would prove indicative of the double nature of human figures in Picasso's oeuvre, where the universal often collides with the autobiographical.

Two of Zlamany's most immediate mentors are themselves beneficiaries of Picasso's infatuation with the circus: Hockney, already mentioned, a significant influence in terms of methodology, and the hard-edge abstract painter Stephen Westfall, an exemplar in intellect and passion rather than technique or motif. Westfall is a master colorist whose reductive-seeming geometric abstraction belies complex, constructed notions and deconstructions of modernism's ubiquitous grid. In Westfall, the grid is often precarious, askew and vulnerable, and in an outgrowth of his love for Picasso's Rose Period and a shared admiration, no doubt for Watteau, the harlequin check has become a pattern in paintings by Westfall since around 2016. The choice of pink, blue and ochre in *Ateller II*, (2021), has been specifically related to Picasso's *Salimbanques*.

In his ongoing obsession with Picasso, Hockney has used the Spanish master as a springboard to rejuvenate or reboot his engagement with representation in different career phases. The rampant perspectival liberties of his recent portraiture—in which Oona and her father, Hockney's longtime printmaker Maurice Payne, have both featured—are arguably an extension of cubism. Hockney's Picasso-mania and circus themes dovetailed in the Metropolitan Opera sets he designed in 1980 for what the Met would bill as their "French Evening": the Leonide Massine-Jean Cocteau ballet *Parade*, setting music by Erik Satie, and two one-act operas, *Les mamelles de Tirésias* by François Poulenc and *L'enfant et les sortilèges* by Maurice Ravel. An earlier Picasso moment saw Hockney responding to Wallace Stevens' book-length

poem, *The Blue Guitar*, (1937), with a print portfolio of the same title subtitled *Etchings by David Hockney who was inspired by Wallace Stevens who was inspired by Pablo Picasso*. (Hockney worked with Payne on this edition.) Motifs and stylizations from the etchings found direct expression in his *Self-Portrait with Blue Guitar*, 1977. This unfinished work was in his London studio at the time he painted his lifelong friend, Gregory Evans sleeping in front of the painting, occasioning a work that explores the distance and intimacy of an artist's handwriting as it depicts a person from direct observation on the same surface in which it represents a self-depiction executed in a self-consciously artificial, yet credible and, in its way, just as "life-like" a style. Stylistic acrobatics of this complexity, redolent of the simultaneous sophistication and naivety that is intrinsic to Hockney, come across in a tour de force of portrait construction by Brenda Zlamany that immediately predates her circus paintings and arguably represents a kind of "style-circus" in its own right—to risk straining the analogy, in view of its layering, a triple-ring circus. *Self-Portrait Painting David Hockney Painting Oona*, (2019) imagines Zlamany in what is hardly studio attire of tight leather pants, Prada boots with Hermes belt and a silk red blouse painting what viewers should take to be the painting they behold. Hockney is averse to other artists drawing in his workspace or when he is at work, a common feeling among artists, and even has a sign in his studio prohibiting photography: Zlamany asserted parental rights in photographing Hockney at work on Oona, photographs that would form the basis of this work. Her attire, in other words, is what she might wear to gallery openings, not to work in her studio: this is a fantasy, albeit rendered through realism. Hockney is seen from reverse, his gait nonetheless familiar, with a cigarette smoldering, at work on one of his perspectively-reversed portraits of Oona, while Oona, as Brenda would have painted her, is seated on the dais. The thin mirror in which Zlamany appears with her red blouse and green background is a shocking intrusion upon the blueness that otherwise pervades the composition in Hockney's sweater, the curtain behind Oona and the ground in Hockney's painting. Brenda and Oona's poodle, Sallie, who had died before this painting was undertaken, foregrounds the whole composition, a capricious *memento mori*.

Earlier, I reference the realist, romantic, symbolist, modernist and postmodern iterations of circus painting. Picasso's *Family of Saltimbanques*, despite being Picasso, is very much within the symbolist idiom, albeit that cubism was waiting in the wings. A truly modernist circus is that of Alexander Calder who, as a young artist in Paris in the 1920s, enthralled visitors to his cramped studio with performances of a circus made of rough, improvised materials using wire and found objects, with growling commentary and tinny musical effects. Calder's *Circus* was the toast of the avant garde, his calling card to such figures as Marcel Duchamp and Piet Mondrian. The artist would soon be laying the rudiments

of his mature modernist inventions, his mobiles and stables, so-named by Duchamp. What makes his circus modernist—both in its construction and in his performances—is the at-oneness of material and experience. The simple, homespun, almost oafish crassness and yet convincing authenticity of Calder's *Circus* stood it apart from the actual circus of most representations—whether glamorous or tawdry, whether romanticized or depicted realistically. Calder's *Circus* is no longer a vehicle for an artist's sense of alienation, stranded mysticism or melancholy. In its abstractness, indeed, it is arguably closer to circuses known and loved by circus aficionados, despite its primitive representation. Thanks to Calder's touch and voice, his ingenious ingenuity and unfazed fumbling, his *Circus* is ribald, raucous, Rabelaisian.

This would not be Zlamany's *Circus*, but it is, arguably, her friend and studio-neighbor Katherine Bradford's—although I would argue that what Bradford offers is a synthesis of symbolism and modernism. *Mother Joins the Circus* is the title of a 2019 painting and of an exhibition presented by Adams and Ollman Gallery in Portland, Oregon, in 2020. The images here include so many familiars from the iconography of circus: *Circus Ring*, (all works, 2019) with assorted strongmen; a *Circus Lady* looking bemused in her tutu; a *Bare Back Llama Rider*; and, with a pair of tutu-sporting women arm-in-arm, *Bare Back Circus Riders*. These circus-specific images held the wall with such settings as a beach, the sea and an indoor pool suggesting that, like the cosmic settings familiar elsewhere in Bradford's oeuvre, all the world (if not the universe) is a circus for her explorations of human foible and limitless imagination. In a way, the essence of Bradford is the collision of the cosmic and the all-too-human, of universal experiences and the artist's own, of subjects found through improvisations of gesture, color, and form at the service of expression. The circus strong men are a natural extension of her earlier paintings of superheroes as explorations of gender and vulnerability. As to her title painting, I'll offer a perhaps intrusive biographical



Brenda Zlamany, *Stilt Walkers, Family Portrait #3*

interpretation based on clues from the artist's lectures in which she recounts having grown children already in Maine by the time, relatively late in life, that she left for New York together with a new lover and now now her life partner, to become a full-time artist. With Bradford herself the mother, the art world becomes the circus.

To those who don't leave town with the circus nor await its arrival for their fix of pageantry of spandex, glitter and eroticized body-triumph, epitomized by Everett Shinn's *Tight Rope Walker*, sport and its attendant fanfare—the sideshow of cheerleaders—and the ritualistic paganism of town parades can more than suffice. Walt Kuhn and Wayne Thiebaud, in his majorettes from early in his career, offer tight-limbed glimpses of this homespun glamor in their majorettes. And Matthew Barney has elevated his own unique fusion of closed-circuits of symbolism in a steam-punk aesthetic of sport, masquerade and eroticism that smacks of stay-at-home circus. The melting of mask into flesh and animalistic outgrowth, pierced into memory in moments of his *Cremaster* series, finds an equivalent in what are, typically for Brenda Zlamany, at once literal renderings of something observed and variations still growing in symbolic weight and resonance in her series of nine circus mask portraits, observed in the Arabian desert but painted during lockdown as we all masked up.

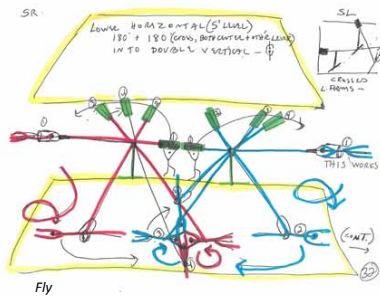


Brenda Zlamany in her studio

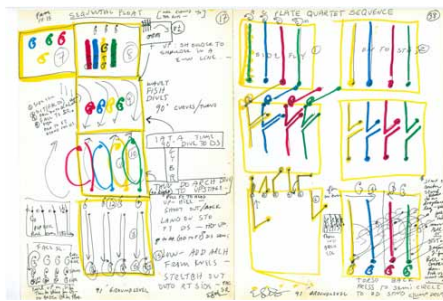


Brenda Zlamany, *World Upside Down*, 2020/21. Oil on linen, 96 x 72 in.

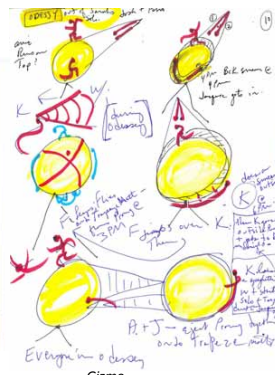
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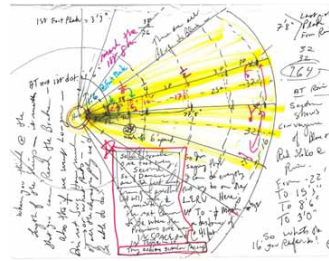
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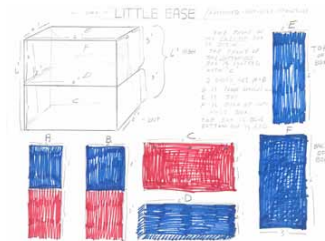
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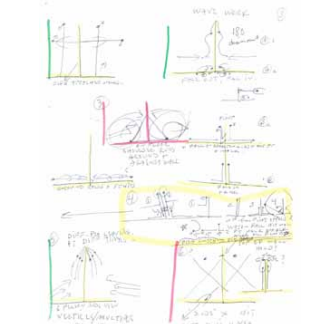
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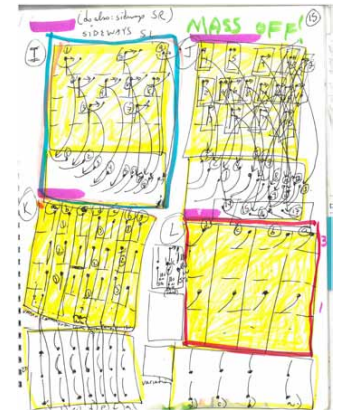
Human Eye



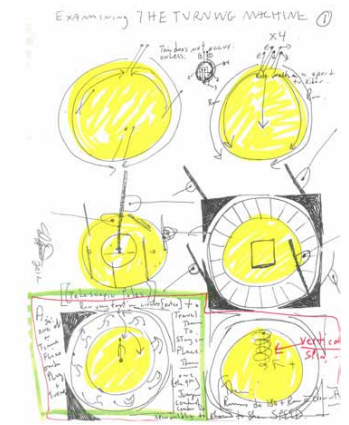
Little Ease



Wall Run Turn



Human Fountain



Turning Machine

Our Designated Action Hero: A Conversation with Elizabeth Streb

On January 6th, 2022, I had the pleasure of interviewing Elizabeth Streb. Although our paths have intersected many times over the years, this was our first conversation. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed having the conversation.

Q. (Mia) So, Elizabeth, I've read many articles about you and I've watched your work for decades. I'm curious to hear from you the transition from STREB, Elizabeth Streb Ringside to Action Heroes. What was the thinking behind this development in your work?

A. (Elizabeth) Things were so seismically slow. When I was working alone, I had a studio on Canal Street for many, many years. I think from '77 to '95. It was during the loft law battles that we all went through, whoever had a loft in Soho. I was never really a dancer. I started training as a dancer at

17-18 when I went to college at SUNY Brockport and I majored in dance just because. This story is common knowledge, but because I had an identity as an artist, because I could draw for the nuns all the time I was growing up and, you know, enlarging Hallmark Cards and whatnot, that was my natural ability without any training, but I was obsessed with physicality. And yet I thought, okay, I'm not going to be a PE teacher. I'm going to major in dance, just out of the blue in my own brain. And people were saying, you can't major in dance, you're not a dancer. I thought, I can train. I'll train. I got this. Because Brockport was brand new that year as a dance department, they let me in. I gave an excuse, something like Rose Strauss was the first chair of dancers. Well, what qualifies you to be in the dance group? In high school, at our Lady of Mercy High School, I picked up all the danc-



ES1_CT Wemple 1993 Photo Credit: CT Wemple



STREB Company, 1993

Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Streb, photographer unknown

es at the discotheque and I could train all my high school friends to do those dances. It's all about rhythm really when you think of it. And Rose said, "that has absolutely nothing to do with modern dance." So, that was my first segue into the field and they let me in.

But it's so interesting because I think that fiddling around in my studio, doing things out in San Francisco when I first got there in '72 and then came back to New York in '74, I really, Mia, I did not know what I was doing at all. I just knew the action, not the body moving, was my subject. I knew

that right from the get-go. And what we're doing now like in Seattle in January and the show for Jacob's Pillow this past August that they commissioned us to do, it was from Ring Side to STREB Extreme Action, but it was really about starting in the '70s with my solos, the rope dance, the pole dance, the hoop dance, the dance with just my body. And I just started experimenting. And, as I did that, it looked like I was manipulating this equipment. But what I was really doing, most visibly with the rope and the pole was tracing spatial trajectory where I had planned eventually to go.

Q. Right.

A. It wasn't about my body. Of course, all the reviews were about my body because they were only looking at the body as a subject. And I think, apropos of your question, I knew early on that if dance as a field picked the subject of movement to be the body, they are really missing the boat.

Q. Exactly.

A. Because everyone knows the body is not that interesting. I mean, look at it. I mean, come on. So, I was just constantly stunned and, as a person getting stunned by mild disappointment in the field I had entered, I was quiet about it. I just thought, look, I know what the body is going to do. You walk out on stage and you're going to be right side up. You're going to choose one, one base of support, the bottoms of your feet, mostly. Humphrey/Wiedman falls to the elbow and back up. Big deal. Everything was about grace, which got stolen from music, I'm sure. What is grace? And a few of the transitions. I disagreed with every single aspect of what I had been trained to do as a dancer.

When you have a thought about something you're most in love with, and for me it was movement, I just kept thinking, what's possible? I think that the transference from *Ring Side*, which was the name of one of my dances that did on a circle, in a tilted circle at The Kitchen in 1985, when The Kitchen as a performance place was still in Soho, all the way to realizing I'm going to build these machines to redirect and resculpt and redefine what's possible in a new terrain. It happened to be that I built The Hill that same year. The Hill was Michael Shorts, my dancing partner and I, going up and down and up and down and up and down. It was at a very steep angle, and it was nauseating. It hurt. I could go on and on about this and that transition. It was really neat having these blips of inspiration, these ah-hah moments, about what movement could be. The body is just simply an implement of this movement. And, without equipment to promulgate force and to deal with, how do you land from 30 feet? I'm not going to just do leaps and jumps in Petit Allegro. So I really was asking, I guess, to be simple about it, a very unreasonable question that really upset people even in those days in the dance world.

Q. Oh, when you were first working, it would have completely thrown them for a curve ball. You were so far ahead of what everybody else was involved in doing. I'm really interested in your attraction to flying and you have a kindred spirit here. As a three-year-old, I dragged my tricycle up the five or six steps of the two-family house we were living in at the time to fly, to fly off, off the steps. And I did fly, ha-ha-ha, on my tricycle.

A. Oh, wow. Wow. Beautiful.

Q. Yeah, I rode it off the porch.

(Laughter.)

Q. Literally.

A. Wow. Why are we only meeting now after all this time?

Q. I know, really. Well, we certainly were in the same cir-

cles. Among other things, I created ARTWALK NY and I organized The Kitchen's 20th anniversary.

A. Oh.

Q. And I've produced performances by Luco Pozzi at DIA and the Chicago Art Fair. I was on the board of directors at Dance Theater Workshop, which is where I saw you first.

A. Yeah, because I did showcases there in the 70s.

Q. Yes.

A. And David White, the Executive Director of DTW, was a real supporter. In those days you had to say, uh-oh, I've got to get out there. Choreographers have to do it. So I would bug David. You realize people have to like you to present you. It's really not about how brilliant your work is because it sure probably didn't look so brilliant then. But, anyway, that was very interesting because that was my first show. And then in '82 he gave me a whole couple nights.

Q. Yeah. I have memories of you sitting on the edge of the stage with David doing a Q-and-A after the performance.

A. Oh. That's great.

Q. So it goes back. He's such a great guy.

A. Oh, he was the greatest believer in the promulgation of dance and young dance artists. I don't know if there's anyone like him now. He just had such a wide berth of knowledge about movement and a love of movement. I ran into him in ballet classes, I think.

Q. Yeah, amazing. Amazing force in this world, this performance art world. So is wanting to leave the ground your impetus or what? From Upstate New York, when was your moment where you wanted to take flight?

A. I was obsessed. I had a great mother; she adopted me when I was two. I had a father, too, but I didn't pay much attention to him—I mean, an adopted father. I had this question like what, what should I do? And she goes, what do you mean? I mean, what am I supposed to be doing? I was just obsessed with answering that question at a very young age. Our Lady of Mercy High School had a varsity baseball and basketball team and I was on the first string of both. We played Madison High and all of the different high schools in Rochester. It was rare to have a girl's team, women's team. But I just pursued it. The reason I pursued it, it wasn't so much about flying. I think my interest was really, if you're not going to camouflage anything about action, which I think dance is all about camouflaging and presenting in a certain privileged way. I realized that all the girls in my SUNY Brockport Dance One Modern class were trained on Long Island to dance their whole lives. And to me they could all dance. But to me, I wasn't a dancer and somehow, thank God, I wasn't intimidated by them. I was just doing my movement type thing. I wanted to fall, not fly. And I wanted to understand that flight is only beautiful when you realize that—and you juxtapose that with the failure of flight, the moment that the earth intercepts and stops in a very, very rough way your flight. And, so, changing bases of support became very, very difficult and I had to do that very clumsily, you know, I didn't

really know how to be on the line in the air when you're falling and you're not, you're not that happy. You're worried about the future, which means when the ground encounters your falling body. Then I would slam into a wall because I thought, what a good idea. Why don't you do a move, run so fast and so furiously and forget about the wall. Pretend it's not there. Don't slow down, just let it stop you. I had someone build a wooden wall in the studio on Canal Street and I did it. Wham. I practically broke the wall. But those are the experiments I was doing to see what else the body could take. And so I was just in heaven.

Those days I cooked for a living and I was off the books. If you worked in certain restaurants in the village, they didn't want to have you on the books so they gave you cash every night. Also, I think you have to kind of be an outlaw in the art world, myself, and if you're not from a rich family or even a well-to-do family, you juggle. I didn't get my first paycheck from STREB until I was 42. I never got arrested or anything because they couldn't find me. But I didn't pay taxes or I didn't file anything. So it was all a little bit, like I felt like I was an action pirate in a certain way.

Q. You were. You definitely were. I have asked this question of Philippe Petit and I'm curious to hear what you have to say about your state of mind or consciousness. I asked Philippe, what was it like consciously to be on that wire?

What is it consciously for you when you're suspending your own personal needs and safety to relinquish yourself to the act of falling completely, which that trust is such a big part of what you and your performers do.

A. Yeah. And I'm close to Philippe. He worked in our studio a bunch of times and he was singularly my big hero doing that thing he did across the World Trade Towers and everything he did. But that was, that was so truly an unreasonable venture. So truly he really wins the prize for being out of hand with an idea. I don't want to get off on a tangent because I could say many things. What was the thing you want me to—

Q. Where you were at mentally, consciously, in that moment where you basically relinquished your safety or concerns about the future and entered that place where you're suspending those things and just allowing yourself to fall and to be in that moment. Like when, when and how? For your dancers, too, because I know that whole issue of trusting for them is of paramount importance. It's one thing when it's your own idea or you are the source of this plan of action. But when someone else tells you this is what you're going to be doing, but for you, specifically, how, how did you get there? How did you put normal concerns aside and just say, this is the direction. Because really you're venturing out into the unknown completely when you're doing that.



STREB-Link

Photo by Jamie Kraus, Courtesy of Jacob's Pillow

A. Yeah. Absolutely. But I think when you deeply are not so concerned with your safety, whatever anyone conjugates the idea of safety to be. It wasn't my conjugation. I didn't think I thought I was impervious to anything and I wasn't going to let that fear seeping in stop me. Not that I wasn't afraid all the time. But I think that it was an appetite, Mia. It was my obsession. Because I did downhill skiing, also, all my youth and I did it my own way. I did take a lot of lessons on some hill—Ellison Park Hill in Rochester, New York. But, snow skiing and motorcycle riding is where I met real velocity. And I had to have them to gain that skill. I compared every move I made to going that fast and figuring out how to turn or crash. Even in my later years when I was still snow skiing I mostly fell down. I fell down because I thought that was more interesting than doing beautiful curves on the mountain.

I think that I never really had a problem—I was curious about a certain type of appetite I gained as a young person on the motorcycle, on the ski slope, even playing sports. I really felt that my vocabulary and my conjugation of a question was my new terrain. When I got in the studio, when I didn't have to rent space, I could do whatever I wanted. I could put up a wall. I could hang things on the ceiling when I was doing this baby trapeze dance. I used a wooden dowel and obviously it broke. It was trial and error, trial and error,

and then trial and error, error, error. It was mostly just a lot of mistakes. But I gained an appetite even more so. I started to frame my appetite in actual process and I believed, I guess, the end game was you need machinery, you need spaceships. I felt even though it was just a wooden wall, it was our new spaceship. How do you occupy vertical space? If you run hard enough, you can stick on that wall a number of times. You can have five people going at the wall. The first falling dance I did was called *Free Flight* at The Kitchen. When it moved over in '86 to Chelsea and I just had five that were in the company and I just had us go, dive, dive, dive, dive, dive. We each did it five times. And the audience, when they realized that that was the beginning, middle, and end of just 25 falls, flights, wham, wham, wham, it's like—they started screaming. And they went, what? That's all? And I questioned time. I questioned the whole notion of being careful. Or the notion of gaining a technique, like ballet, what does it really represent on stage? I tried to analyze that particular type of dance and it ended up being about presenting privilege. That's what the subject was.

Q. Right.

A. Privilege. You had that many hours to have your mom or dad or whoever take you to ballet class every week a few times? And so, for me, it's a class thing, too. My dad was a mason and just the decimation of the body over those 40

years, watching his body disappear. I think that my appetite was there. It wasn't so much I had a road map, Mia, because I didn't have a road map, but I was just so obsessed. Even when I would leave the studio and I'd walk up to the village to do my cooking job and I would remember what move I just did. I first did a back fall, I said, well, if you can act like a piece of plywood and keep that perfect balletic vertical as you fall, then it won't hurt. And it didn't hurt. I didn't have mats then, so I was landing on a wooden floor. All of that, it just excited me. I'm sure that when Philippe took that second foot off the roof of the World Trade Tower then, I'm sure that he was flying with all the birds out there. He's a major guide. In fact, he gave me a foot of that wire on a plaque.

Q. How cool is that?

A. Above you there is Philippe Petit's piece of wire. So, this isn't exactly a calibrated explanation for your question. It's a beautiful question. But I was, I was just, what do you say, digging my own path. I didn't care what people thought about it because I was just so excited about it. I just had that hunger. And the other thing, there's the plan, I had absolutely no plan B. No plan B at all.

(Laughter.)

Q. Well, as you know, when you're on the path, it's like walking on a knife, you are walking on the blade of a knife. The further along you get, the narrower the blade becomes. So your choice is—you have no choice, essentially, is what I'm trying to say. I really believe that's true. My own personal theory is, for myself and what I try to share with others, is to simply tell the truth. Tell the truth to yourself. Tell the truth to others. But if you're what you are, it's in your work. If you're being truthful and going after that, there's no way that you're not going to get there eventually. It's inevitable.

A. Do you think it's inevitable? I also read scientific books. That's my favorite subject, science and physics mostly, and also math. And in these languages that are so esoteric you just love those numbers, but you don't know what they mean. I'm not a mathematician, don't get me wrong. But I think there's many scientists that go about their inquiries in such private zones. Maybe the small group of major mathematicians know who Andrew Wiles was, the guy who solved Fermat's Last Theorem, which had been unsolved for 300 years. And then, how long was that paper? It was probably



STREB Rehearsal
Photo Credit: Stephanie Berger



STREB-Steel
Photo Credit: Stephanie Berger

like 400 pages. And then the other guy who was in the book *Perfect Rigour*, he was Russian and Masha Gessen wrote it. She was a mathematician before she became a political activist in America. But it was the Poincaré Conjecture. And no one could solve it. No one. I can't speak articulately about what the heck that was, but this person who just did solve it.

It's just impossible—many of them are on the spectrum, I think—but it's just impossible to imagine that you're going—those were equations, like Fermat wrote it down in the margin of one of his papers but as if it was solved, but apparently it never was. Somebody who understands that terrain, that geography, has to make up formulas, has to make up what's missing from the knowledge base of, in our case, the dance world, the movement world. I think that I borrow from those sectors of knowledge. I don't think this is different. This is like, wait, we have to invent another way to transfer our weight separate from one leg to the other, one leg to the other, you know?

Q. Well, in a recent issue of *New Observations* I questioned why people are even making art. When an artist just sends in an image of a work of art that they have lying around the studio, why bother? So I wrote my essay on the fact that I am a painter and I stopped painting a number of years ago. I did recently start again, because I love it. But I consider myself making art in the world. Do we really need all this art? I mean there's such dreck circulating out there. What we need is to connect people to their inner self, and that's really what you're doing.

A. I think that every person can understand human frailty and human bravery and absurdity. Why would you do that to your body? Right now my body is—I mean, I guess it's broken, but it lasted a long time. But I just think that your comments and your vision is so really profound because the questions are really the meat of the matter. What questions, what curiosities can you construct into a system that would allow you to discover things? And you can't know—like for me, Cassandra and Daniel and Jackie, especially, and Bobby, he runs the trapeze circus part of STREB. STREB is not my dances. STREB stands for Strength, Trust, Risk, Energy, Body.

Q. That was great.

A. What's STREB? But now, for me STREB has all been an inquiry system. How can you ask a question that seems so unquestionably true that it doesn't occur to you to ask it? And, if you can come up with anything like that, then you start working and experimenting. Like maybe there's a piece of equipment that you can use. Maybe there's just air. I think, that the way dance as a field collects the archives of dancers and choreographers. With time, we are getting a lot of suggestions to do that, and we are, but it's not my 99 dances. That's just my answer to some feeble questions and some, I think, pretty great questions. But they were never answered. None of the dances hold the answer to any of my questions, really. So the system that would get passed along is really an inquiry system. I think that you're sort of saying

that to me is that, how can you come up with a really good question that will keep you busy for a little while?

Q. The size and shape and age and all of it that goes into the choosing of your dancers, and Bobby and Cassie were saying that you let them choose to some extent their costumes in certain pieces in order to even incorporate more into their personalities, I see that as the message. You're taking samplings of humanity and you're asking them to look at this system and interact within it. And that is looking at the unseen that is all around us every day. At this moment in time, I think that's humanity's biggest challenge is to reconnect with the unseen realms, of which indigenous people have never let go.

A. Yeah.

Q. And empower themselves, really. Because you have to be strong to do your movements, to get involved in what you're doing, you have to be physically strong but completely on point. You have your program set out for you, so to speak. And that's what I see, somewhere along the line we detached from that. It's really time to reclaim that, that part of our beings because it's just critical right now.

A. It is critical. And to have something mean something, if there is such a thing as meaning? I'm not sure. It is a grabbing of someone's attention who didn't expect to see what just happened in front of them. But when you're doing all the balletic *porte de bras* and step-step-leaps and *Petit Allegro*, there—and the ridiculous reference system, that it means something, they're saying it is a reference system to something else rather than, no, it's actually the thing itself. The action is the thing itself. It's not a reference system. You cannot tell a story with movement. I feel like it either has the kids, and that is why we have our whole Kids Action program because that is where the beauty of the prize lies all untampered with, those little kids. When they would come to the show and they're sitting in the front in times before COVID, screaming and being surprised and gaping. That's your test bunny or a test rat. You watch these kids, not the adults. Because, if you can surprise a child, then you are on the right track.

Q. Right. You must have had a number of surprises with children, with their movements and events with them in the studio just knocking your socks off at various times? In terms of surprising all of you, actually.

A. Absolutely. Cassandra, who is the associate artistic director at STREB, really built the Kids Action program, not from the ground up because we have been doing it really since the '80s. Hope Clark started it. Mary MacArthur started it in Philadelphia with Charlotta Schulman. People I knew, who knew the kids would want to slam into a wall. And it just kept growing. When we got to SLAM, we were really able to make a program of Kids Action.

I think that I see the dances that get constructed by Cassandra and the kids, and Jackie and the kids and Daniel, who works with three-year-olds, the first age group that we have

in there, and it brings tears to my eyes. The bravery and the surprises and how they remain human, but they're not presenting, they're doing. It's really teaching us how to be more authentic with every single move we make.

Q. Have you seen a change at all with them due to the Covid virus or is—I know Bobby shared that he has a program via Zoom with kids and they're at home, working together, which is fantastic. Do people seem reticent in any way or—my big concern is that kids are being sequestered at a time in their development when they're meant to be with their peers and I'm just curious about what you see with all of that right now?

A. Whenever I look at a Zoom that the kids have made with Cassandra throughout this COVID scorched earth policy thing, it has been so charming. And they have figured out—she has figured out, she guides the kids and then the kids come up with their own moves, and then she constructs it or gives them moves. When you've got nine squares on your screen, or six, and she conjoins them with body parts. I think I made one Zoom dance called *Grammar*, because I can't choreograph on Zoom in that way. But pictorially she made the most moving, hysterical, lovely bunch of pieces with those kids. And they were in their rooms, whose geography where they happen to live or be, was equally fascinating; but yet conjoined with an order of events that went temporally along. That was very, very profound. I think that those ideas that get transferred to the kids by Cassandra and Jackie and Daniel, I just think that it's the future of movement.

Q. And to get them young and keep them engaged.

A. Yeah. Some of them have stayed there their whole youth and then went off to college. So we've had graduating classes. And it's not easy to keep the attention of a teenager, or even a middle school-aged child. I think movement is really the great elixir that inhabits the first journey, the first crawl step, the first actual vertical step. It's so much more profound, I think, than our society allows it to within.

Q. Absolutely. I think since the 1980s we've been in a very superficial place in general.

A. Yes.

Q. I hate to say it, but I think Madonna—well, I will say it—I think Madonna really lowered the bar so dramatically. You know, I'm 65. It really pains me to think that this whole generation of people will not understand quality. There is a difference.

A. Yeah. No. I agree with you.

(Laughter.)

A. If someone once asked, do you think Cindy Lauper or Madonna would still be standing, whatever that was, and I'd say, oh, definitely Cindy. And I was wrong. Except she is still here, so. It's just, Madonna, smart businesswoman, you know?

Q. Smart businesswoman. Exactly.

Q. Well, Elizabeth, we're getting to the end of our interview. Is there anything specific that you'd like to share about

your work?

A. I just wanted to say, we've been sequestered. Obviously, we came back into rehearsal in April. Thanks to Christine Chen, my executive director and Paul Henry, my accountant, Bobby, Shannon, and Mary, who just kept this truck rolling down the road. And it's been very interesting. And all these things popped up. We got commissioned by Jacob's Pillow. We opened Brookfield Properties Manhattan West Uptown, 33rd and 9th Avenue thereabouts. Then we did Balter Dance, and it was our sixth time there. And then, our trip to Seattle.

Being in SLAM, where all things can happen, we have the enormous privilege, thanks to Kate Lavin and the Department of Cultural Affairs, and Michael Bloomberg, who made it possible to purchase this amazing garage.

I want to say thank you to everyone who believed in STREB, and the parents who bring their kids here, and the fact that I inaugurated it as a public space right at the get-go in 2003. Every museum and every theater in New York City should make their space public, you know, walk on in! They get so much money from the government and from the city itself that it isn't private. It shouldn't be used as a private space.

And all of those things that came into my mind that allowed the strangers walking by to walk in with just an invisible invitation. Meaning, oh, you need to use the bathroom or the drinking fountain? Just come on in. With simple word of mouth, no promotion. Attraction, not promotion. I think that the public process that we utilize and continue to utilize, more carefully now because of Covid, allows us to really meet people—this is about strangers that we don't know yet.

Q. Right.

A. Inviting strangers in provides us the opportunity to see how they react to what we do. I think that all of that, which is a little bit of a jumble, coming out of my mouth, has been—I've been graced with being able to keep this place open with a huge team. And, keeping it humble. Our budget is still not big, but big enough. And so, I guess that's all. I mean, I have so much to say. We could talk, Mia, for the rest of today, don't you think?

Q. Yes. There's no question about it, absolutely. But we will continue this discussion, there's no doubt in my mind. It would be an honor. I would love to. And I would love to bring you all out to South Dakota. I think that that would be amazing. And Philippe!

A. Thank you so much. It's been a real pleasure to talk to you and to have this exchange. And I really do appreciate your belief in our wild venture here, so that continues.

HASHTAG # EXTREME POSSIBILITIES!

An interview with Bobby Hedglin-Taylor and Cassandre Joseph of STREB.

Bobby and Cassandre sat down for a chat just before the 2021 holidays. We covered many topics and many years of life in Manhattan, where I had lived for 18 years prior to moving to the country full-time. I learned much about the workings of Elizabeth Streb's company and their resourcefulness during the COVID pandemic which essentially halted the creative life for many organizations and individuals in the New York City region and around the world.

Their enthusiasm is contagious. Bobby invited me to harness up when I visit their space once the pandemic subsides. I may just take him up on it!

A. First, thank you for all those kind words, what we do is so niche. Any enthusiasm and appreciation from an outside eye is always so validating. So, thank you.

Q. You're leading the way.

A. Thank you.

Q. You really are.

A. It's been such a pleasure. I am probably the most senior in the company with the dancers. I have been in the company now for about 14 years. It's a long time for a dancer, especially given the intensity of the work, but it feeds the soul in a way that it's hard to walk away. When I first joined the company I would say the average life span of a STREB dancer was about three to five years. And now we've come to the point where it's 10-plus years. Which is really not that common in the dance world. So we really have something very special in that building.

And I think Elizabeth is, in essence, leading that way and she has a whole tribe of people who are just so enthusiastic about following her.

I did gymnastics my whole life. I started when I was four years old. And gymnastics is kind of intense in the way that STREB is. When I retired from the sport, I wasn't really a performer or a dancer. I did dance to supplement my sport. But the two worlds were so similar that I found myself just loving it. I was taking a weeklong intensive workshop, it really spoke to me, and so I decided to try out for the company.

When I joined, I was just a dancer so I would come in for rehearsals and then I would leave. Eventually, I started to teach in the school. As I started to teach, it opened up a whole new perspective about the work and I found that it made my relationship with Elizabeth's work a lot more profound. It made me a better dancer. And I started to teach more and more and more. And then I started to direct the kids' company. I built them prototypic machines in the way that Elizabeth builds us unique machines. And I really tried to give the kids an equivalent experience, obviously much safer, but challenging in a way that they really flourished.

After I dove deep into the teaching pool, I decided that I

wanted to do more behind-the-scenes things. I wanted to develop a stronger curriculum, and I wanted to get my hands dirty with more programming in our classes and residencies, and everything else that came our way.

I think at that point it was six or seven years that I was in the company and I became what we called 'education liaison.' Basically, my task was to make sure that the school was following Elizabeth's principles, and changing along with her ideas.

And maybe after two or three years in that position, our associate artistic director at the time, Fabio Tavaréz, retired. Fabio showed Elizabeth and the community as a whole that you could withstand the work for a much longer amount of time. And I think his tenure also inspired this change in keeping the dancers longer in the company. He retired and I took over his job. Currently I'm the associate artistic director. I help Elizabeth plan the rehearsals. And I make sure the company is in good shape and that they're taken care of.

There was a small stint where I was education director. So I think my role as associate artistic director encompassed the idea of taking over the curriculum or continuing to work with the curriculum, making sure that there's a very solid bridge between the company and the school.

The past year our teachers have been more or less all in the company. The company's contracted to teach, so once you sign up to be a STREB dancer, you know that you will start to learn how to teach and take shifts in our school. Our work is so unique that you can't really hire off the street, you can't just hire someone to teach pop action.

My job right now is to develop our teacher training program to provide opportunities for those who are really interested in Elizabeth's work, but are not in the company, to come in and train, and subsequently there's an in-house teacher certification to be able to teach her work.

The pandemic has thrown us for a loop. But we pivoted very fast. I think it was a week after we shut down that we went remote. Which was a crazy experience in that we have a huge studio and we're impact based, so we're not used to being cautious or careful. And then all of a sudden everybody's in their apartments and we had to really adapt the work for that. It was challenging but it also didn't break the floors and walls in people's apartments or homes.

The work also is vast. It encompasses many disciplines and it has a lot of theory behind it so that we were able to sustain our clientele for these two years. Specifically for the kids, we were able to create performance opportunities, and do a couple of Zoom shows. Although we miss the building and all of the flying that goes along with being in person, we were able to expand. It was wonderful to see that the work was so deep that it could carry us through even though we take the extreme action part out of it. And I think the theory held us, and it kept our interest and it kept our kids' inter-



Bobby-Trapeze, Photo courtesy of Bobby Hedglin-Taylor, photographer unknown

ests, which is pretty difficult to do.

Q. It's very difficult to do.

A. Yeah. I mean, I have a four-year-old so, if I can hold her attention for 10 minutes, I feel like I won something, you know?

Zoom opened up a whole world that we're not quite letting go of. We're looking at how we can move forward in some measure of a hybrid form. Although we are so action based, it's amazing to be back. Both our company and our clientele are starving to create more and new things. So, I see it's just limitless. It's just limitless. I think that's it, maybe.

Q. I completely agree with you. And you're creating an environment where children can expand their creative use, stretch their creative muscles in ways that are so unique and so needed in these days when the challenges that are going to be coming at us will be so great in the days to come. I mean, we're really being forced to draw on that inner core of strength and energetic connectivity and that's what you're doing.

A. Right.

Q. So harnessing energy and thought and consciousness, as well as intention is very much what I've been involved in sharing with other people. And the work that you're doing is such an example of all of those things and many more.

A. That's great. That's amazing to hear.



KidsPopAction2
Photo Credit: Dan Lubbers

Q. So, Bobby, how about you?

Bobby: Yes. I was born and then what happened?

Q. Ha-ha-ha.

Bobby: Basically, I'm from a small Italian family in Pennsylvania and I came to New York to be a dancer. I was a ballroom dancer and I got a scholarship to the local ballet theater. They sought male dancers because they needed as many as possible. And so, I became a ballroom dancer and started to get work here in the city. Different restaurants would have orchestras. Mama Leoni's restaurant had an orchestra in the basement. My ballroom partner and I would come in and dance a couple of numbers. Then we'd get people up to dance with us. That was my introduction to moving here. Since I lived so close to the city, I'd been coming here since the 1970s with my cousin. All of the arts were accessible but sort of on a nontraditional level. We would ride our bikes across the George Washington Bridge and park our bikes in Times Square and go to a Broadway show. Things that were just unheard of at that time. That was my introduction to New York.

And then I got a full scholarship to the American Musical and Dramatic Academy and began training and dancing, singing, acting, all that kind of stuff, doing commercials. I was doing that circuit for a long time. And then a job came along that involved a circus musical. The director sent me to the



Bobby-Teaching. Photo courtesy of Bobby Hedglin-Taylor, photographer unknown

only coach in New York City who was actually training people to do trapeze. She was a Ukrainian Olympian and her name is Irena Gold. She kicked my butt and got me in the air. And then the show's financing fell through and I started getting work as a trapeze artist. So I was going all over the country in small shows. Then I got a job in Las Vegas. It became this extra way to make my performance world come alive and it was something I was good at. I just naturally gravitated towards it. Because, when you're a country kid, you don't fear heights because all you do is climb trees all day, you know?

After I got into the circus world, the nightclubs in New York started hiring aerialists and there were six aerialists at that time, it was in 1989, 1990. And we all had the lion's share of the work, but most of the clubs wanted females. I was the only male of the six performers. I would have to wait my turn until one of the nightclubs could not hire a female and called me up.

Later in my career, I started to combine circus and theater again in musicals, rock concerts, and music videos. It was a way to combine all of my skill sets in one place.

I was on the road with the musical *Barnum* and I was a swing for 17 people. I was covering 17 roles, including females, because a lot of the acrobatics were non-gender specific. I would be on for sometimes as many as four people. If

somebody was out with an injury or, there was a time when people would take vacation leave, I would be covering them. And I was also the standby for one of the leads as well as the standby for PT Barnum.

I cut my teeth there—and it transitioned itself into what I do at SLAM. I'm kind of the swing in—not in the dance company, but in the inner workings of SLAM. So that when something happens here, at a moment's notice, we pick it up and we go.

I was actually in Florida and I got a call to work on a musical on Broadway called *The Frogs*. It was a Stephen Sondheim musical. So I flew up and met with the creative team. I left *Barnum* and I came up to New York to work on *The Frogs*. And that was where I got my first taste of what STREB was because I was training people a block away in somebody's living room; believe it or not, they had aerial rigging.

Q. Oh, my gosh.

Bobby: Because there were no training facilities in Williamsburg at the time. So—anywhere, really. There was no trapeze school, there was no Slam, there were no aerial arts studios. In fact, when we moved into this building, the surrounding building was a junkyard and we had Port-A-Potties on the sidewalk. I have been here since Slam opened in 2003.

We opened February 9th, 2003. I'll never forget it. But that



Cassie Teaching
Photo Credit: Dakota Ray Photography

was the day that the building opened and shortly thereafter I started renting the space. And that's how I got my work into the musical *The Frogs*. Ironically a few years later, I don't know if Cassie remembers, but Stephen Sondheim himself, came into STREB to see a show here.

A. I do.

Bobby: And I met with him after. I think he must have been in his eighties at that time. And, when I was talking to him I said, I know you won't remember me because there are hundreds of people surrounding you but, if you look up in the air, this is where we trained the girls for the musical *The Frogs*. We had women on aerial hammocks and this was the studio. And he said, "yes, you trained Jessica Howard." And I said, "what? Whoa, wait a minute, Stephen Sondheim remembers me."

So it's kind of his fault that I'm here. When I started doing that, Elizabeth was having her rehearsals here and I would be renting the space and I was training people behind her or I would be working out myself. Before you know it, she was starting to open The Trapeze Academy and she'd been meeting with Noe and Ivan España, who are sixth generation circus family fliers.

We have such a unique space. While Elizabeth was meeting with them, they designed our rig to fit in this space exclusively, so it was unlike any other rig in the world. It's called a *Petit Volant* rig, which basically means a smaller trapeze rig. But we still have the same distance that you would have in an outside rig from the catcher to the flier, you just don't

have a net like you would have outside, because a net requires 12 feet of height. And, because we only have a certain amount of height, we use a pole-vaulting mat as a safety mechanism. Over the years, we've upgraded to inflatables. Then, in 2017, we fundraised over ten thousand dollars and bought a streamlined, custom-designed air bag for our rig and we've been using that ever since. And that's how I got the community support to help us build out the different programs at STREB.

But, to flash back to 2003, 2004 when the school was opening, I had already been trying to become a trapeze catcher. I was working and training at Trapeze School New York, which was down on the Hudson River at the time. And Elizabeth said, "I need somebody, can you, would you come and be a catcher in my school?" And I said, "of course." So, that was the first time I started working here under the direction of the first trapeze director, Francois MacKay from Montreal, Canada—brilliant trapeze artist, great coach. He was here for about six months. And, when he gave his notice, Kim Cullen, who was our producing director at the time, called me and offered me the position and I turned it down. I turned it down three times. And it wasn't until the very last call that I just said, "well, maybe you should take the job, Bobby." And here's why. Because flash back to 9/11, I was coaching gymnastics during 9/11 and all of us had PTSD after that event.

A friend had made me a disc of music and the first song was Mary Chapin Carpenter's *Why Walk When You Can Fly*. And that was my alarm clock. My CD alarm clock would wake



Kids-PopAction1
Photo Credit: Dan Lubbers

me up with that song every morning and it got me through PTSD from 9/11. But, when that last phone call came through for the job, my alarm was going off with the slogan, which would become our slogan, *Why Walk When You Can Fly?* And that's what the hint was like, I think you should take the job.

And that was 18 years ago. So I have been with the STREB family for 18 years as the director of The Trapeze Academy. I'm also the rentals manager, the party manager. I also work in development. And my development work is mostly dealing with the circus community since the circus and theater community is where my expertise lies.

We've rehearsed several Broadway shows here. I worked on the musicals *Pippin* and *Chaplin*, the musicals on Broadway here at SLAM. We've had rock concerts. Phish, the band Phish, we've rehearsed their special New Year's Eve shows here. So there have been a lot of ways that I have been a different type of reach for the company to get Elizabeth's work to a totally different avenue and a totally different place in the ether of dance.

The very first time I ever saw a STREB act or dance was Elizabeth had, I believe it was a 20-second clip that was on MTV in the '80s and it was one of her more famous pieces called *Ricochet*, which is a Plexiglas wall, which the dancers are actually forming shapes as they slam into the wall. And I'm sure Cassie knows more about the history of that dance because she did it for many years. But that particular piece, I remembered it as soon as I walked in and I heard the echo of the Plexiglas. So I kind of had that connection and flash back to that.

From all those years working here, I've seen how Elizabeth's work has not only grown but transcends all of what dance really is. And we're not—it's not a dance—it's not a dance company, it's not a gymnastics company, but it's completely unique. The one thing that I will say about my circus work was, when I was an actor, I would walk into an audition and there would be 90 people, 90 other men who looked like me, sounded like me, danced like me. But it wasn't until I put trapeze in the bottom of my resumé in the special skills that people would stop and take a moment and then start to talk to me in an audition. And that's when I started to get other work. So in the same way that STREB is unique and trapeze is unique, it provides self-esteem and it provides a very positive way to identify yourself. It gives you an identity. And, you know, to this day people are like, "oh, you're Bobby the trapeze artist." And I said, "well, I just had hip replacements so I'm not much of a trapeze artist." But, yes, it became my identity for so many years and it still is. And it's been something I'm symbiotic with at STREB, as well; I'm like part of the landscape because I've been here since we opened the Williamsburg location.

And just like what Cassie was saying about how we pivoted on a dime, I think I was so used to pivoting as the swing, as soon as we knew what the new formula was, we went with

it. Here I was a trapeze coach. Not everybody has a trapeze in their living room, what can I do to contribute? I used to volunteer in the 8th Ward at St. Vincent's Hospital. I volunteered with a friend who was a hypnotherapist and she used to do guided meditation and hypnotherapy for AIDS patients. She taught me different ways to meditate and different ways to teach meditation. I had totally forgotten that I even did that. Then here we were in this horrible situation and I said, how, what can I do, what can I contribute? What can this chunky, middle-aged man, former trapeze artist do to help people? And it was meditation.

Then, because my body was going through a lot of physical changes, I was using a foam roller a lot. So I created a foam roller class. Through it I was able to still connect with the community of our students. A lot of staff would take my classes as well, because not a lot of people knew how to use a foam roller for their entire body. And a lot of people didn't know where to go for peace of mind for meditation, so I would create and write these meditations every week and I would create and write a different skill set for the foam roller class. And that became my contribution to dealing with the pandemic.

And then we asked, "what can we do for those performers who don't have the opportunity to be in front of an audience?" So, through the guidance of Christine Chen, Mary Schindler and Ayal Prouser, we produced a small, 39-minute circus called *Sofa Circus*. And it's still on YouTube if you want to check it out.

Q. I will, definitely.

Bobby: It's great. We pulled all these different acts together. Everybody was in their apartment or performing on their roof. We had people performing in their backyard, on their roof, in their living room. It became a circus and I was the ringmaster from my bedroom.

Q. Fantastic.

Bobby: I truly believe that that shows not only the ability that we have as a company to pivot on a dime, but it also shows that as a company we were reaching out to the kids who needed us so desperately. They were stuck at home. Parents needed us because they wanted their kids to have an activity. And then, everybody had their Zoom shows, but ours was special because we curated the artists that were using Slam for rehearsal. Then, when Elizabeth was putting together her Action Maverick awards, she created these Zoom dances with Cassie. And then that blossomed into something else because we were able to do birthday parties on Zoom. We were able to bring kids together that weren't normally able to be together because of the pandemic, but not only in the same town, but all over the country. So, it was a totally new way to connect with a different audience but it was also our way to serve the community.

I remember Cassie and I were in every staff meeting every week, on these Zoom calls. And then we were not always in—we were not always in a zone, but we were not, we were



STREB-Cassie-Air, Credit: Photo by Jamie Kaus, Courtesy of Jacob's Pillow

trying very hard to have an end result. We were trying to get out of this pandemic.

Q. Sure. Would you say, Cassie, that this is really the STREB sensibility, this fluidity and flexibility?

A. Yes, among many things. I think our technique really encompasses the personal best, and we say that to our students. That we're open to adapting as the body changes, as the experience level changes. So we try to make our work as accessible as possible. Our vocabulary, the programs, and the people that come to STREB are fluid. We like to say we're a petri dish and we encourage the mixing of all different kinds of people so that it creates new and innovative ways of moving. Definitely flexible.

Q. The STREB sensibility and the fluidity and flexibility that you all have is the earmark of creative artists. Elizabeth and Laurie Anderson, for instance, are two women performers who have adapted as they've gotten older and incorporated a mixed-aged audience. I remember when Laurie Anderson did a piece, I can't even remember the date now, but she had people in their seventies and eighties, this was quite a while ago, and it just adds a whole other dimension to the concept of performance. I think there's a certain element of the trickster in terms of your sensibility at STREB. You know,

the fun, the humor, the game element I think is really important.

Bobby: Yeah, thank you. I totally agree. And I also see that Elizabeth allows the dancers to have personalities, too.

A. Yes.

Bobby: It's not as strict. It allows them to shine through the work. Also, one of the most fun things I have is listening to the dancers do the calls during the dance because they're really fun and unique. Some are traditional, normal. But then you hear, Cassie, I'm sure you have a bunch of them; you have to nickname the move that's coming up. And so I found—the show that we did at the Park Avenue Armory, I was so glad that the apparatuses were miked so that the audience could hear what you were calling and what was next. And there was some humor in that, there were some chuckles, you know?

Elizabeth really allowed that. She gave the dancers that. The work is the work and the design is the choreography that she wants to see. But she gave the dancers a voice, a humanity that is not seen in a lot of different companies.

A. We also like to say that she doesn't camouflage gravity. So it's less of a performance and more of an action, like a series of action sequences. So often, our shows are never

really the same. Even though we rehearse and we have set moves, she encourages us to do whatever we can, whenever we want. So there's a lot of freedom for the dancers. You're doing the same move, but then how can you make it more exciting? So with each thing that we do, and that includes the calls. Bobby, you were saying that we get to nickname the calls. It's more like naming the invention. A dancer would make something and then name it and then that gets incorporated into the vocabulary.

Bobby: *Ladies in the '80s* is one of my favorites.

A. *Ladies in the '80s*, yeah.

Bobby: When you guys are on the turntable with three or four women in the center, and that was *Ladies in the '80s*. And you could hear that and that was one of my favorite parts because it gave the dancers a humanity and that was when I noticed that every dancer was so unique and hand-picked for very specific reasons. And that's what I loved about it.

A. Yeah. Yeah. You know, the call system has changed, I've seen a little bit of evolution. The calls were essential to the piece. It was to keep you in unison but then also to mark sections of the dance. And as dancers start to explore the freedom that Elizabeth gives us, they started to make it more like the calls based on social references. There was the humor that came in with Fabio Tavaréz, who was a clown in the circus for a long time and who brought out this new element; the dancers just went wild with it and they started to expand it. It also increased accessibility to the audience. So we would make a call to a particular move, and then the audience would connect and laugh more.

Oftentimes, laughter at the STREB dancers is not as common as the gasps. So, it created an element also of accessibility allowing us to show our personalities more than just the work and then achieving the crazy feats, which is its own thing.

Q. Let's talk about the machines that are incorporated.

A. Yeah. Elizabeth is an action junkie; she thinks of these prototypic ideas. And I think what precedes the actual structure of the machine is an idea of what the force is. So, she'll think about gravity or falling and then she'll create something to support it. Often our machines are like extensions of the human body and its capabilities. Sometimes it's about how, once a dancer jumps, how can we keep that body in the air for longer? Then, there are harnesses and huge tracking systems. A harness is not a prototypic machine. Tons of disciplines use it, but then she creates a system around it to facilitate new types of moving. Such as, can we put a dancer on the wall? Can we rotate the stage 90 degrees so that the audience is looking up versus looking straight forward? And then, as the years go by, I think she gets deeper and deeper into exploring ways of putting the body in a certain set of physical forces.

So, the latest machine she built is the only one of its kind in the world. It's called the *Molinette* and it was built by Noe

España, of the circus family that Bobby mentioned earlier. It was the original, or was derivative of a solo piece from his mother. It's like a bar, an axle high in the air. You can swing around 360 degrees, in a free fall kind of gravity on one end and then tip your way up to the other end to complete the 360. Elizabeth had the idea of making it a trio. So she had the machine built and put it in the room. There's no manual, you know. I would say like in the circus world or in the gymnastics world there are. I guess I'm not sure if the circus world has one, but I guess OSHA would be maybe the closest thing to a governing body. Is that right, Bobby?

Bobby: Well, that's one of the issues with most circus apparatus these days—there is no governing body, as far as that goes.

Bobby: But we do abide by all of the rigging standards that are in place, that deal with gravity and deal with force. We would never use an apparatus that would go beyond what the human body can sustain.

Bobby: All of those things that are created in those apparatuses are unique to Elizabeth. She never copies the circus, she draws inspiration from it. And one of my favorite apparatuses, we call the *Whizzing Gizmo*, which I got to play with the very first day it was put into this space. Basically, in the circus it's called the *Wheel of Death*, but we don't like to use that word.

(Laughter.)

Bobby: But it's half of a *Russian Swing* and it's half of a *Wheel of Death*, as far as circus terms go. Those apparatuses were built by a traditional circus family because they never gave away their secrets in the past. So, when I was trained by a circus family member, she was actually going against the grain by doing that. It was unheard of. You never trained anyone who's not a family member. You never gave away your secrets to somebody who wasn't a family member. But it wasn't until around the mid-late '80s—early '90s when that started to change and they started to be a little bit more open to the idea of bringing non-circus families into their act. Working with the España brothers, they are so collaborative and so attentive to detail and safety, of all things, they know inside and out what that apparatus can do before Elizabeth even gets it. And then, when Elizabeth gets it, as Cassie was saying, it's like a petri dish. You get to just play. And then Elizabeth, you can see her just perk up when something catches her eye. That's the joy of what her work does on different apparatuses. Her inspiration comes from these different apparatuses, it becomes the dance floor for her technique.

When I was learning trapeze and when I was learning aerial fabric and things like that, I'm a dancer, my whole background started as ballroom dancing, traffic patterns, walking, stunting, things like that. But my dance floor became an aerial fabric or my dance floor became a one-inch trapeze bar. It's the same way with Elizabeth's work, how she draws inspiration from the circus world but puts her own stamp on



KidsPopAction3
Photo Credit: Dan Lubbers

it and still creates the same awe and gasps from the audience without copying the circus.

The association with the España brothers has always been an ongoing thing that we pride ourselves on because they are, first of all, the nicest family you'd ever want to work with, but so passionate about collaboration and about sharing what they know. That's one of the things that is just very unique about that relationship.

Q. That's fantastic. That's really what it's all about, ultimately. And that's what's so exciting about what you're doing because you're breaking barriers in so many different directions. You know, when I think of a choreographer using air in the '80s, David Parsons' *Caught* comes to mind; it was ground breaking. But, for the most part, choreographers have been stuck to the ground. And Elizabeth has broken down all of that in terms of an idea. She's gone off in so many different ways and here we are with all this new technology and she anticipated that with all of these machines and—

Bobby: Yeah. She also explores the length of pieces. There was a time when we were doing 10-second dances and they would be sort of infiltrated into the show where she would have her regular piece, but then in between was a 10 second dance, and it was just created for that moment. She was exploring with longer pieces, shorter pieces. Where does a piece make its point enough for an audience? Also the length of a STREB show has actually become more standard now that it's a one-hour show because it's action packed from start to finish. It's a thrill ride. You get in, you sit down, and you are in for a treat.

Cassie, do you remember, I think you've even done a few of those 10-second dances; I believe you even choreographed a bunch of them.

A. Yeah. You know, when she first started choreographing, her dances actually were about 20 minutes. I feel like I heard from Christine Chen, our executive director who used to dance in the company, that one piece in particular was 40 minutes long. So as the years went on, she started to question the duration of a dance. Like how long does it take to make a dance? At what point is it considered a dance? And so the pieces went from 40 minutes to 20 minutes to, right now the standard is 3 to 5 minutes.

But I think each piece in the way the machine is prototypic, and then coupled with the idea of giving the dancers total freedom to kind of create and to change and to invent, creates a unique experience and unique dance each time. It dictates what the questions are and how long it takes. It's always evolving as we move forward.

A. We have done outdoor performances. In the beginning, we tried to keep the numbers of the dancers small; we tried to practice as much social distancing as you can at STREB. I think what evolved from that is a new piece or her new work, called *Time Machine*. She went back into the archives and then she started working on these solos. She brought back about six solos. This how STREB works. Before the ma-

chines were as gigantic and like of course, inducing as they are now. It was a hoop, a rope, a pole, light sticks, some mugs. That was the evolution of STREB machines, I think. Prior to that, her ground work was impact based and it was mainly focused on the body, using different surface areas for impact so that you're just not returning to the bottoms of your feet, but to truly fly, you have to be able to land in all ways as safely as possible. From this point, she started to explore, what could be done with this rope? What could be done with this hoop? In this new show it begins with just floor work heavily influenced by Cunningham so that it kind of has that Cunningham feel. And, if you pair it to the last piece—a trampoline piece called *Air* with eight dancers that run around and jump on the tramp together and fly off and it's repeated for seven minutes. So, it takes you on the evolution of STREB from the floor impact-based, to the more machine-heavy and air-oriented exploration.

A. I do want to say, though, we have different kinds of shows. So there was a time when she felt the trajectory of her work was more outdoors. I don't know if you know about the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, there was the Festival of Arts before the Olympics. She put us on a city hall, on the London Eye. We jumped off the Tower Bridge.

Q. I've seen a video of it. Yeah, it was great.

A. Yeah. It was this idea that we could take over outdoor venues. We've done things where we've worked with Bergdorf and walked on the side of the building. We did a lot of projects for Bloomberg on the outside. Every time he does a building, we have the honor of doing the ribbon cutting. Also our proscenium shows are tailored for the proscenium. It might be a little harder to find theaters willing to take the weight of our equipment or have us dig holes.

Bobby: Yeah. That's always going to be a challenge.

A. Elizabeth is exploring the different venues that allow her to be as extreme in nature as possible. But definitely the pandemic has shaped the work in that way. In our outdoor performances we brought back some machines that we had not touched since 2012. And then, again, there was the necessity of social distancing, so we did a lot of solos, which is definitely not where STREB is currently. It shows how adaptable the work is, and how rich in content; we're able to handle any kind of environment.

Q. Well, I'm in the process of creating an artist-in-residency program out in South Dakota. It's in a little town called Wasta and it's on the edge of the Badlands. And I'm organizing a number of things on the Pine Ridge Reservation. At some point it would be incredible to bring you out there to perform. I would just love to see if that's something we can do in the not-too-distant future.

A. Bobby: I was just going to say, and Cassie can attest to this, whenever the company does go out of town, because everybody is a teacher, we do a lot of residencies and then performances. I believe there was a very successful one in Akron, Ohio. I know I had to fly out to Akron and be with

this university while they trained and taught dancers. And then we broadcast it live during a SLAM show. So there was a lot of cool stuff that we have done where the company goes on the road, and they don't just perform, they actually meet the community and they actually influence the dancers of the community by giving them a little taste of what STREB is. That's always part of our mission, too. Action is for everybody as far as the activity goes. Because we have this education program that is codified and breaks down age-appropriate moves and choreography, it can translate to any community and in any way. That's one of the things that I find is great about our company and different from others is that, some companies will come to perform that night, they do their piece, they go back to their hotel room, they go to the airport the next day. We don't. Our company goes into town. There's a string of workshops. And then people learn about either what they saw last night or what they're about to see. It just brings a totally different element to our approachability as a company, as well, because we do a lot of work with the community. We do a lot of work with under-

served communities, as well. Part of the mission of the work is to spread it out and bring it to everybody. Not just the audience members paying for a ticket.

Q. That's fantastic. Well, I lived in Manhattan for 18 years and I was very involved with working with the homeless. Among other things, I created ARTWALK NY, which started in 1995 and raises a million dollars annually for Coalition for the Homeless. I've organized a lot of benefit auctions at Sotheby's and Christie's. In fact, I saw that you do an art auction, and I think I have something I'd like to donate for your 2022 event.

Bobby: Oh, that's wonderful. Thank you.

Q. Yeah. My pleasure. But I see a real synergy, again, listening to you and having time and space. Time and space are words that get thrown around a lot. But time and space, in the sense that indigenous people use it, is the same time and space that you and Elizabeth are using it, as a concept. It's a much heavier, much more meaningful definition of those two words. The implications of harnessing those forces and using them is what you're doing artistically and in the world, which is what the indigenous people are doing. So I think you'd have a great time and they'd certainly love seeing you. Coming out there will change your lives in some way.

So, is there anything you would like to add before we sign off?

Bobby: Yeah. There's an old trapeze saying: Step off the platform and the net will appear. And it's like, take that risk and step out and the street will come to meet you. Sometimes you have to take a risk to have success. And you have to just have a little bit of faith and step out and the net will appear.

Q. I believe that 100 percent. Thank you Bobby and Cassie!



Silks-CommunityClass
Photo courtesy of Bobby Hedglin-Taylor, photographer unknown

Out of the Circus and into the Community

By Deborah Kaufmann
Healthy Humor Co-Founder, Director of Training and Education



Dr. Dibble and Dr. Yadontsay, Healthy Humor Red Nose Docs, cheering up a young patient with the magic of giant bubbles.

Photo Credit: Paulo Salud

In some form, clowns have always been an important part of human societies. The town fools, the mythological tricksters, the *Heyokas* (sacred clowns of the Sioux people), and jesters hold a mirror in front of us, so we can recognize our faults and laugh at our troubles. They are, at their core, healers.

Clowns are misfits and bumblerers. They may forget their manners, drop things, tangle themselves up in simple tasks, speak an inappropriate truth, state the obvious, react with over-blown emotion, ridicule authority, or misunderstand what is expected in polite society. Faced with a problem, clowns will repeatedly fail in their earnest efforts, but remaining optimistic, will keep trying until they find a surprising solution. Their failures and fixes are funny. Through their fiascos and the efforts to solve them, clowns allow their audience to feel smarter and more virtuous, or to laugh as they recognize their own similar struggles with the mundane. And sometimes clowns surprise us with a moment of virtuosic skill, like Harpo Marx exquisitely playing the harp.

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The actors who choose the role of clown are skilled physical performers. They practice an art form that takes time to master, honing multiple skills and making a personal investment to take emotional risks, so they can be in the moment and vulnerable with their audience. Their aim is to offer themselves as objects of ridicule (self-ridicule included) to bring people together in laughter and relief of stress.

And yet, clowns are much maligned. Their efforts are overshadowed by bad press, horror film tropes, and people with bad intentions using clown masks to hide their identity. It has become popular to claim a fear of clowns, though very few people are actually coulrophobic.

How did this happen? The image of a clown that is conjured by saying the word is most often the face of a circus clown, with exaggerated makeup: a white base, over-sized features, a false painted on smile. A photo will NOT be provided; you already know what that looks like. It is also the face that has been transformed into a monster by movies such as *IT*. Over time, circuses expanded from small shows



Dr. Dibble, Healthy Humor, New York

Photo Credit: Maïke Schulz

with one ring into big extravaganzas performed in huge tents or arenas, so clowns' makeup needed to be exaggerated for their expressions to be read from the ring all the way up to the seats at the top of the arena. This BIG face was meant to be seen at a distance, in bright light. Like any theatrical makeup, it is stark and a bit scary when viewed up close.

The energy needed to perform in such a huge venue is also oversized. When unsophisticated performers adopt this image and style of performance in more intimate venues, like a birthday party, it can certainly be scary. It can feel like an invasion of one's personal space, regardless of the other redeeming skills of the performer. Add to that the fact that the human is not recognizable beneath the makeup. What results? *Stranger danger!* Horror writers and Halloween mask makers understood the fear of strangers and exploited it by making those ghastly clown masks that are used to terrorize people in movies. They are even donned by people who want to disguise themselves for criminal acts.

They are NOT clowns.

In contemporary times, clowns have played important roles in film and television as well as in the circus and theatre. Stars like Lucille Ball, Dick Van Dyke, Charlie Chaplin, and Robin Williams have all used the art form to create memorable, beloved characters.

Clowns have come out of those formal venues and found a valued role in places where people are suffering great stress, or loneliness and isolation: natural disasters, refugee camps, hospitals and long-term care facilities. Clowns are a

welcome and healing presence in these difficult situations.

There are organizations that employ the spirit of the clown to work in conflict zones, refugee camps and areas of lingering poverty around the world. They provide physical comedy shows and workshops, which allow children and families a moment of respite through laughter. Some collaborate with local artists, training troupes of performers to create theater that addresses local issues. Clowns Without Borders and Bond Street Theatre are two groups doing this important work.

Fulfilling their role as healers, clowns have frequently visited the sick. There are images of clowns with hospitalized children from as early as the 19th Century. However it is only in the past 35 years that this practice has been organized and specialized. It started in the U.S. with the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit. Now this burgeoning profession has grown and developed into a worldwide discipline called by many names: healthcare clown, therapeutic clown, hospital clown, medical clown, clown doctor. The Red Nose Docs of Healthy Humor, Inc. use joy, wonder and laughter to encourage and empower children and their families at hospitals all across the U.S.

Red Nose Docs, working in pairs, always ask permission to engage. They listen intently, make direct authentic connections and tailor their routines for the energy and needs of the audience. Each improvisation is age appropriate and respectful of special needs. Their objective is to read the room, to see and be seen, to take a breath, to assess whether the moment demands a simple, sweet song or a build-up into a raucous slapstick routine. They constantly adjust according to responses they receive, departing at just the right moment to leave the room vibrant with positive energy.



Dr. DiddlySquat, Healthy Humor, Loma Linda, CA

Photo Credit: Billy Murray



Dr. Ima Confused, Healthy Humor, New York
Photo Credit: ©2020 HealthyHumor/Jim R Moore

They make rounds on a regular schedule, year round, so they become a part of the fabric of the hospital. They develop long term relationships with children and with all of the hospital staff, from the security guards to the Director of Pediatrics, lifting everyone's spirits. Though they are not therapists, their interventions are often therapeutic. Their antics support the treatment goals of medical providers, and help to interrupt the trauma of hospitalization.

Below are some stories from Healthy Humor that illustrate the power of the fool's presence. Presented alongside are photos of the open and approachable characters of Healthy Humor, that are typical of healthcare clowns.

With a teen:

Dr. Ima Confused, dressed in orange from head to toe, as always, and Dr. Dibble, in many polka dots, visited a teenage mother in the Mothers and Babies Unit. The baby was fine, but the mother had a bit of an infection. When the two of us entered the room, at first we thought she might be sleeping. We peeked around the curtain and Dr. Confused asked, "Are you trying to sleep?" She shook her head no, and said, "I'm sad." Our hearts melted. We engaged her in a game of "Who Can Get the Answer Right?" The teen against Dr. Dibble. The questions included, "What is Dr. Ima Confused's favorite color?" "What is Dr. Confused favorite flavor of juice?" "What is Dr. Confused favorite ICEE flavor?" Each time, Dibble paced back and forth thinking deeply, before answering INCORRECTLY—our patient would smile and laugh and state the obvious answer, with Dibble loudly bemoaning her own inability to guess. By the time we left, the sad young mother was smiling quite broadly.

— Julie Pasqual, Dr. Ima Confused

With an elder:

"L" displayed evident physical challenges. As we all entered her room, she was possibly still emerging from sleep, but she visibly perked up with curiosity at our presence and smiled at the novelty of our arriving with her physical therapist. The types exercises the physical therapist introduced and the revelation of L's hearty sense of humor and her musical sensibility informed our repertoire. As the physical

therapist led L through multiple reps of arm lifts, we sang The Beatles' *All Together Now* with topical lyric adaptations such as "1,2,3,4...Lift that arm a little more...5,6,7,8,9,10 I HATE YOU!!!!" (playfully directed at the physical therapist). We played Offenbach's *Can-Can* theme as L was led through a series of leg raises (and laughter); the stress/strength ball exercises were accompanied by "Squeeze the Ball" to the tune of *Feed the Birds* from Mary Poppins. We ended with *A Hard Day's Night* and left a laughing and energized-but-exhausted L to finish up with the physical therapist.

— Richard Ellis, Dr. Trikki

With a small boy:

We went in to visit a five-year-old boy whom we had met several times before. He was happy to see us, but in pain and a bit angry. Yet he was refusing to take his Tylenol. We could see it sitting on his tray table, a small purple pill in a meds cup. I say to my partner, "Let's go, I am just too hungry to stay here." He asks me what I want to eat. "Oh, something small, round, maybe grape flavored. Definitely, I want something purple." My partner agrees that something purple would be delicious, and we both start complaining about how hungry we are. The boy is paying close attention. Suddenly I see the pill on the table, "Look, that is purple!" and start to dive for it. My partner sees it too, and immediately stops me, wrestling with me to get to it first. We have a wild physical competition, climbing over each other, pulling each



Dr. MooChaCha, Healthy Humor, New York.
Photo Credit: ©2020 HealthyHumor/Jim R Moore



Dr. Waffles, Healthy Humor, Miami
Photo Credit: ©2020 HealthyHumor/Jim R Moore

other back. Just as I am about to touch the pill in its cup, the boy, laughing heartily, looks at me and grabs it, saying, "That's MINE!" and downs the pill. He is triumphant at our disappointment. The nurse is thrilled.

— Deborah Kaufmann, Dr. Dibble

The healthcare clowns of Healthy Humor are thoughtful, talented, performers, using variety and circus skills, puppetry, music, physical comedy and improvisation to offer respite and catharsis, a chance for people to laugh at or to laugh despite their troubles. They are representative of the many artists who dedicate themselves to bringing joy, laughter, wonder and comfort to those who need it most in communities around the world.

They are clowns!



Dr. Ma, Healthy Humor, Chicago
Photo Credit: ©2020 HealthyHumor/Jim R Moore



Dr. Spats, Healthy Humor, Baltimore
Photo Credit: ©2020 HealthyHumor/Jim R Moore

Oskar Schlemmer and The *Triadic Ballet*

By Camilla Fallon

The Bauhaus School in Weimar as a revolutionary and vibrant creative laboratory for art and theater corresponds directly to and is a result of Modernism. The aim of the Bauhaus was to make a new and powerful connection between working disciplines, where form follows function and all artistic processes help to form a new creative utopia. Oskar Schlemmer was recruited by Walter Gropius, the director of the Bauhaus school in 1921 to teach mural Painting and Sculpture. His contemporaries were Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. Gropius and Schlemmer intentionally combined the interest in the human body, kinetic studies, and relationship of the performer to the stage space as well as painting and sculpture. Gropius, too, thought of theater as a picture frame full of the possibility of transcendence and metamorphosis, a perfect medium for artists. Inflation was rampant in Weimar Germany and the theater was a convenient outlet for creativity, especially for an architect like Gropius who was not able to build. Gropius gave Schlemmer *carte blanche* for the Bauhaus theater. He claimed that Schlemmer as a dancer experienced space with his whole body: "We know from his paintings as well as from his stage works for ballet and theater, it is apparent that he experienced space not only through more vision, but with his whole body."¹

Modernism was fresh in 1922, the year of the first performance of Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet* at the Landestheater in Stuttgart on September 30. It was performed again during Bauhaus Week at the Bauhaus in Weimar in 1923. It was a success and performances followed in Milan, Berlin, and Paris. Buoyant from the success, Gropius appointed Schlemmer the Master of Form and head of the Bauhaus theater.

We know Oskar Schlemmer as a painter whose well-known painting of the Bauhaus, *Bauhaus Stairway*, 1932, famously resides in MOMA. He was a painter, dancer and theatrical designer. Schlemmer studied painting in Stuttgart as Post Impressionism led toward Cubism. In a 1912 letter to Otto Meyer he wrote: "I pleased the conservatives with my naturalistic paintings *a la* Corot, then I continued along the French path to Cubism and in my recent works have struck a revolutionary note." In October 1919, Schlemmer wrote in his diary and reiterated his respect for painting that "Cubism [he identifies Braque as the inventor but credits Picasso with its application] is the form best suited to the four-sided surface; as a circle will demand circles, a square squares. The fractured quality of our age, the dismemberment of time; fragmentation is reflected in the paintings of the Cubists." He goes on to say that "Cubism is the most decisive, important achievement of modern art. Formal element of

construction, of structuring, and element of expression."² Clearly he was comfortable with it as a painter, thought in depth about it, but was also a dancer and a set and costume designer, collaborating with his brother Carl.

In 1921, Schlemmer created a dance and costumes using Burmese marionettes. It was met with acclaim in Stuttgart at the Württembergisches Landestheater. The dance, *Nuschi-Nuschi*, subtitled as *A Play for Burmese Marionettes* was also considered as opera with music by Paul Hindemith. It was an ironic piece containing bawdy slapstick and obscene situation comedy. Nevertheless, it was a hit and the creators were gratified until the press was scandalized. Every form was seen as phallic. After the scandal died down, Schlemmer perhaps veered more toward a less specific, more abstract form. On October 23, 1921, Schlemmer wrote, "I have ideas for a purely comic ballet."

Schlemmer was directly influenced by Picasso's Cubist designs for *The Ballets Russes* when Diaghilev was at the height of popularity. He staged early performances of Stravinsky and was very much influenced by Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912). In fact, in 1912 in collaboration with his brother, Carl Schlemmer, a dance team and master craftsman, a nascent round of the *Triadic Ballet* was performed in 1915. Schoenberg was asked to write the music; he demurred. *Commedia dell'arte* was the vehicle. As leitmotif, it looms large as touch points for Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*. The standardized characters of *commedia dell'arte*, Harlequin, Pierrot, Columbine, etc., (approx. 23 characters in all, universal types) helped him invent a new abstract and mechanical choreography, a dance of geometry. The *Triadic Ballet* consisted of three parts: twelve dances with eighteen different costumes. All were performed by three dancers, two male and one female. The first set was a comic burlesque in yellow; the second, a solemn and ceremonious rose, and the third, which was performed on a black stage, was described as mystical, with white circles spiraled into a dancing figure. The costumes were like heavy sculpture with heads as spheres and bodies as cubes. The dancers wore architectonic form and merged with it. The Bauhaus may or may not seem like a lab for a veritable circus act, perhaps closer to an abstract *commedia dell'arte* with marionettes based on the familiar characters, but Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet* was exactly that.

Borrowing heavily from *The Ballets Russes* and noting Picasso's achievement, Oskar Schlemmer set out to make the dance and theatrical piece using architectonic puppets as the clown figures.* He worked with Paul Hindemith again who supplied the music as a piano roll: a mechanized and depersonalized form. The *commedia dell'arte* clown figures

¹ *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, edited by Walter Gropius and Arthur Wessinger, Wesleyan University, 1961

² *The Letters and Diaries of Oskar Schlemmer*, Northwestern University Press 1990 *

The *Triadic Ballet* by Oskar Schlemmer. Author: Anonymous, Collection: Private. Courtesy of The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



are masked, with nearly the whole body masked. This leit-motif was the perfect structure with which to counter the dominant aesthetic, classical realism, which he rejected ten years before in painting, with a mechanical, abstract, albeit comic burlesque dance. Schlemmer and the Bauhaus rejected realism and considered the classical dead; the world had changed and conventional art forms were irrelevant. It was time for something new and pure. Only abstract form could be spiritual and pure, an abstract world was not corruptible, but part of a Utopian vision.

The sculptures and architectonic shapes influenced the physical feeling of the dance, and were like mechanical marionettes. Schlemmer himself, a dancer as well as a painter, felt that ballet as a discipline was free from historical baggage. He used the discrete geometric shapes to form the costumes many of which were comical. Masks, costumes and props also reflected the disjointed world. Schlemmer was injured in WWI and had seen a lot of it as well the period of economic and political instability that followed. Schlemmer and Gropius felt that they and he were liberating the human being by means of abstraction by using the familiar Harlequin motifs. After the Bauhaus moved to Dessau it was forced closed by the Nazis in 1932. Oskar Schlemmer made the well-known painting *Bauhaus Stairway* as a final gesture to the Bauhaus years after he took a post at the Akademie in Breslau. He was considered a degenerate artist by the Nazi regime and lived his final years in quiet obscurity. The ballet has been revived again and again. It was revived in the 1970s, performed at The Guggenheim in 1984, and The Kitchen in 1985, reconstructed by the dance historian Debra McCall. There are too many performances to list here but it was also popularized influencing one of David Bowie's performances, *The Man Who Saved The World on Saturday Night Live* in 1979. It is considered by many to be an example of performance art that still influences artists and performers to this day even if they don't quite realize it.

It was Virginia Woolf who famously wrote "In December 1910, human nature changed." Indeed the date ushered in stream of consciousness writing, Freud's *Psychoanalysis*, and most relevant to Schlemmer, Picasso's Cubism and Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, which uses atonality throughout although not the dissonant 12 tone row that Schoenberg is known for. Harlequin, Pierrot and variations thereof are a given in Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*. This masking of persona and stripping of pathos and heroism was intentional and lead to an abstract and mechanized dance. Dance was seen as wholly emotional, or Dionysian, and the Bauhaus approach would lend it to be completely abstract. Form would follow function and there was a new fascination with the body and the space it occupies. Sentiment is stripped bare to elements, like the square with a square and a circle within a circle. The Bauhaus had a completely modern stance and objective for a new approach to plastic art.

YouTube Video link of the ballet here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxD1OXpCLLk&list=RDMHQmnmnN8o&index=4>

links
<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/triadic-ballet-bauhaus-1444630>

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1 He writes in a letter to a colleague "figurines for Picasso's Russian ballet interested me for two reasons. Dresses from the knees up in conventional garb below the knees spreading into gigantic structures borrowing from his cubistic paintings, a trace of Dada, actually vulgarizations or persiflage of his pictures."

* "In Space, Movement and the Technological Body, Bauhaus performance finds new context in contemporary technology" May 2, 2019 text by Charles Shafai Harvard Graduate School of Design News

The Brooklyn Rail Dec 19-Jan 20 2020 Dance "Voguing Bauhaus" by George Kan

The Brooklyn Rail, Dec 19-Jan 20 2020 Dance "Dance and the Bauhaus" by Mark Franko

Walt Kuhn's Circus Paintings

By Barbara Friedman

Walt Kuhn painted "Portrait of the Artist as a Clown" in 1932; twenty years later Cecile B. DeMille made *The Greatest Show on Earth*, set in the Ringling Brothers/Barnum & Bailey Circus. That might have been my first favorite movie. In grade school, and already melodramatic, I became obsessed with James Stewart's portrayal of a clown who would not remove his makeup. Buttons had to keep his paint on so the cops wouldn't identify him as a fugitive mercy-killer. My heart was only nine years old, but it sympathized.

One can say—it's been said—that painting on a canvas resembles painting over yourself. It's interesting that Walt Kuhn, who made a portrait of himself covered in a clown's white face makeup, was described by friends as the most secretive of men. One of his models explained the importance that Kuhn (like Buttons) gave to face paint. "The application of the makeup I swear—the whole sense of it—was as much and as great as putting the paint on canvas" (Perlman 1990, 102-103; quoted in *Sessions* 2013, 52).

I have always wondered who historically joined the circus, and why they did. I've been to the Cirque de Soleil on several occasions and admired the prodigiously gifted performers, although that show's athleticism did sometimes overshadow the human drama that I was looking for. I actually responded more to a quick-change artist that I saw at the much-maligned Ringling Brothers.

Ever since *Toby Tyler*, the thought of running away to the circus has been a perennial delight for kids. Likewise, I think there's something appealing to young people in the directness and verve of Kuhn's work, and what a critic in 1933 called its "unmalicious feeling for life" (quoted in Adams 1978, 125-126). In the foreword Bridget Moore wrote for D.C.

Moore's 2013 Kuhn exhibition catalogue, she reports being "startled" by his canvases when she was young (Moore 2013, 7). I first encountered Kuhn's late portraits when I was in my twenties, and I remember being stopped in my tracks too. I guess it's their powerful immediacy that struck me, and—as Moore puts it—their "tensile energy...psychological intensity and glowing color" (Moore 2013, 7), which are some of the same qualities that I find arresting today in the



Walter Kuhn, *Self Portrait as a Clown*

paintings of contemporary painters otherwise as different as Kerry James Marshall and Lisa Yuskavage.

Another point of similarity is the way that the subjects in Marshall and Yuskavage confront the viewer unapologetically. I love being stared at by one of the characters in Walt Kuhn's circus portraits. His protagonists hold my gaze as boldly as Manet's *Victorine Meurent* does, and I enjoy what I see as his Manet and Goya inspired-palette—his fluid darks, vivid primaries, melancholy neutrals, and creamy off-whites set off by occasional pinks. The rouge that Kuhn's *Showgirl in Armor* wears affects me in much the same way as the flushed cheeks of Goya's *White Duchess*.

Though it's clear that Kuhn looked at artists like Goya and Manet, his mix of modernist painterly bravura with the skills he picked up illustrating for magazines also makes me think of an artist like Fred Valentine. I remember Fred telling me about his training in illustration, an area belittled by my fellow painters in art school. We were taught that illustration techniques cheapen modernism's formalism but, secretly, that combination has always spoken to me. The same skill set could be ascribed to Edward Hopper, an artist whose range and general appeal is far greater than Kuhn's. But the emotional punch that the best of Kuhn's later paintings deliver feels fresher and timelier than Hopper's. It's telling that most of Hopper's figures are looking away, while the confrontational frontality of Kuhn's subjects feels like the confrontational frontality of the huge three-eyed bear in Fred Valentine's painting. I find it no coincidence that Kuhn and Valentine are also both known for their generosity in bringing the work of other artists to light—Kuhn through his involvement with the Armory show and Valentine in different roles as arts organizer and gallerist. In both artists, there's a willingness to let other subjectivities come forward.

There is no question that many other modernist painters have made simplified, frontal portraits whose figures emerge from monochromatic grounds. But unlike, for example, Kees Van Dongen's presentation of stylized society women, Kuhn's interest lay, as John L. Baur puts it, "in the tragic and human side of his character rather than its traditional glamour" (quoted in Adams 1978, 104). The fact that Walt Kuhn himself created and launched various theatrical productions allowed him to know performers on an intimate basis. The viewer senses his identification with the subject in his paintings, as one does in Brenda Zlamany's new circus paintings. Zlamany includes herself and her daughter in her painting of stilt walkers, while the inverted acrobat in her *World Upside Down* reminds me both of Kuhn's reductive compositions of figures that gleam against a flattened single color, and of what Paul Bird calls the "fearless individualism and splendid isolation" in Kuhn's subjects (Bird 1940, 20). Fittingly, Kuhn's only child was also named Brenda.

Thinking of Kuhn and the present day, I want to mention a tender gender fluidity that appears in quite a few of his best portraits. It is strikingly of the moment—in for instance

Chorus Captain, *Woman in Majorette Costume*, and *Show Girl in Armor* (already mentioned). Their poses and their poise put me in mind of a description I've read of Catherine Opie's photographs. "Resisting simplistic voyeurism en route to elegant, confrontational authenticity, Opie's lens stops short of exoticizing the other, inviting the viewer to come closer, instead" (Artspace Editors 2019). The same commentator says that Opie's lens "simultaneously mirrors and agitates American heteronormativity," and I would use those words about Kuhn's flickering brush. Kuhn painted in a time when marginalized Americans were less likely to be accepted at home, and the circus was not only a place you could run away to but typically a place you could join when you had to run away.

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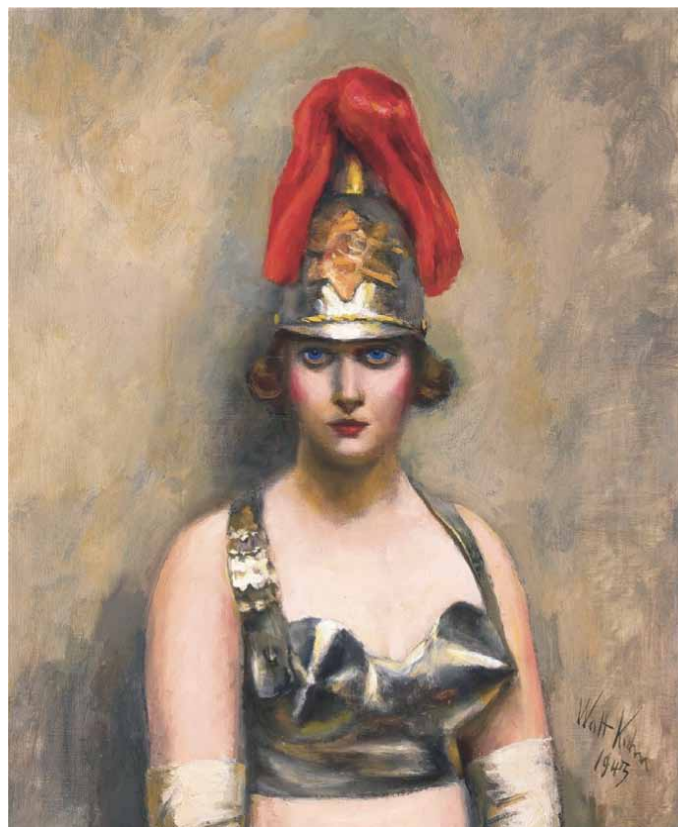
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Walter Kuhn, *Showgirl in Armor*



Kerry James Marshall, *When Frustration Threatens Desire*



Walter Kuhn, *Woman in Majorette Costume*



Brenda Zlamany, *Circus Mask Portrait #1*, 2020/21. Oil on linen, 24 x 24 in.

Meditations of a Mask by Barry Schwabsky

I
At first I thought those stars were teeth
an illegible expression provides for each possible outcome
as earth slowly sheds its skin
in preparation for an interview with the moon
your spirit starts to show the cold air its bones
this fat world has eyes for you



Brenda Zlamany, *Circus Mask Portrait #2*, 2020/21. Oil on linen, 24x24 in.

II
Such heavy shadows
their weight bends the branches
my skin in shreds
drips slowly to earth
waits for words to arrive
the hours we spent not talking



Brenda Zlamany, *Circus Mask Portrait #3*, 2020/21. Oil on linen, 24 x 24 in.

III
Drifting late among faceless houses
humid in the bitter simmering of the
dispossessed
whose words are a hundred
thousand pictures of the coming rain
we'd thought to find their wicked
footsteps more abundant
propose a hieroglyphic poetry of
bliss
in closer dialogue with their fine and
dusty anger



Brenda Zlamany, *Circus Mask Portrait #4*, 2020/21. Oil on linen, 24 x 24 in.

IV
 Sky azure blue, a burning color
 reaches out to take you by the hand,
 compassionate
 you wonder how the world persists
 without these memories
 where blood leaks from the open
 moment
 so many lovely words I won't know
 how to pronounce
 we hear sounds differently shaded



Brenda Zlamany, *Circus Mask Portrait #6*, 2020/21. Oil on linen, 24 x 24 in.

VI
 At least if our intel pans out
 each residual object would be a
 listening ear
 your eye whispers to
 that other dream we requested
 the music that will once have taken
 place
 the hours spent swirling in its liberties



Brenda Zlamany, *Circus Mask Portrait #5*, 2020/21. Oil on linen, 24 x 24 in.

V
 Beneath my aching feet the soil
 remains firm
 shy and lonely death gods take no
 responsibility
 for men whose thoughts are thunder
 and lightning
 indifferent to healing in the pure sine
 tone known as meanwhile
 the one small stretch of time
 entirely composed of thought



Brenda Zlamany, *Circus Mask Portrait #7*, 2020/21. Oil on linen, 24 x 24 in.

VII
 Nothing bizarre among the secrets
 exchanged
 no news from the single sparrow
 wheeling crazily in the breeze above
 us
 that one thing someone hesitated
 to say
 the movie usually ends by nightfall
 the irresponsible hour when
 darkness shows its flaw



Brenda Zlamany, *Circus Mask Portrait #8*, 2020/21. Oil on linen, 24 x 24 in.

VIII
Call off your noisy angels, please
your pets and stray amniotic beings
the pale horizon, its elusive depths
you gradually press up toward the
clouds
the trees we engage in whispering
converse
using off-pitch syllables for lack of
better



Brenda Zlamany, *Circus Mask Portrait #9*, 2020/21. Oil on linen, 24 x 24 in.

IX
In our rose dream theater official
video
the hour need not match its
description
your hidden features mark a deeper
understanding
eyes as soft as piles of ashes
the threadlike seepage of a telling
silence
you can always say no to time another
time



Adopt an Artist Program

THE ADOPT AN ARTIST PROGRAM

Background

The Adopt an Artist Program is a new organization created and produced by Mia Feroletto, the originator of ARTWALK NY and other groundbreaking events in the New York City contemporary art world. Feroletto has now conceived of the creation of the Fresh Art Fund for artists. Creator of The Adopt An Artist Program, Mia Feroletto, was trained as a painter and holds an MA in lithography. She feels that her art education was the most important gift of her life in that it taught her to create from nothing each and every day. Whether it be working on a blank piece of canvas or envisioning a project such as ARTWALK NY, or The Adopt An Artist Program, the same principles apply in terms of combining the seeds of creativity with the practical needs of developing a project in the world. The Adopt An Artist Program re-configures the present-day art world and brings it home to the daily lives of all of us. It holds the possibility of supporting creativity in each and every one of us.

Objective

Stimulate creativity and create a catalyst for the growth of the art industry.

Strategy

Create a domestic and international exchange program for artists and the public.

Mia Feroletto is a well-known art advisor, activist and artist who divides her time between Vermont and South Dakota. She is the creator of A SHELTER FROM THE STORM: ARTISTS FOR THE HOMELESS OF NEW YORK and ARTWALK NY, an annual event for Coalition for the Homeless that has been copied all around the country since beginning in 1995. Feroletto has organized numerous benefit auctions and large-scale special events at major auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's and has served on the board of directors of such organizations as Dance Theater Workshop and Sculpture Center. She most recently served on the board of directors of the Tatanka Ska Institute, the Indigenous school being founded by Paula Looking Horse, wife of Chief Arvol Looking Horse, the keeper of the sacred White Buffalo Calf Woman Pipe. She is the publisher of *New Observations* Magazine, the producer/creator of HEMP NY CITY, a partner in the founding of the Thunderheart Center for the Arts in Wasta, South Dakota and the creator and producer of the Consciousness and Contact conferences that have received world-wide recognition. She is the host of the New Observations podcast on Unknown Country, the channel for all things Whitley Strieber. Feroletto is a committed animal rights and animal welfare activist.

She is determined to maximize visibility for the arts and our cultural world and is currently developing The Adopt an Artist Program to send artists to destinations around the globe in order to create and develop their art. She can be reached at mia.feroletto@gmail.com

CONTRIBUTORS' BIOS

Eric Aho is a painter living and working in Saxtons River, Vermont. DC Moore Gallery in New York represents his work.

Rhona Bitner is a native New Yorker. She lives and works between New York City and Paris. Her work has been widely shown in the United States and internationally. In the United States her work is included in the collections of The Art Institute of Chicago, The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, The Ringling Museum of Art, Wellin Museum at Hamilton College and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her work has appeared in publications including *Artforum*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The New Yorker*, *Beaux Arts* and *Rolling Stone*. She was awarded a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant in 2020. She is on the faculty of the School of the International Center of Photography in New York.

Katherine Bradford, based in New York City, is known for her paintings of people in luminous fields of color. Whether in action or in repose, often swimming, flying or floating, Bradford paints with a formal inventiveness and a shifting sense of figure and ground, giving narrative weight to her characters who may appear as heroes or lovers, families or couples, businessman or isolated individuals. She began her career as an artist relatively late in life and has achieved her widest recognition in her seventies, through New York gallery shows at CANADA, Sperone Westwater and Pace. She has exhibited widely at institutions such as MOMA PS 1, The Brooklyn Museum NY, and the Modern Art Museum in Fort Worth, TX. Bradford is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Joan Mitchell Grant. She has taught at institutions such as the Yale School of Art and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Exhibitions this year include a solo in New York at CANADA, one in Milan at Kaufman Repetto, one in Vermont at the Hall Art Foundation, and a two-person show at Harvard's Carpenter Center.

David Cohen is editor and publisher of *artcritical* and founder-moderator of *The Review Panel*, the critics' forum active since 2004. He was Gallery Director at the New York Studio School from 2001-10 and art critic and contributing editor at the New York Sun from 2003-08. Born

in London and educated at the University of Sussex and at the Courtauld Institute of Art, Cohen wrote for leading newspapers and magazines in England and around the world before immigrating to the United States in 1999. His books include *Serban Savu* (Hatje Cantz verlag, 2011) and *Alex Katz Collages: A catalogue raisonné* (Colby College Museum of Art, 2005). He has an interview with Howard Sherman in a monograph on the artist forthcoming from Snap Editions.

Camilla Fallon Born in Baltimore, Maryland, Camilla Fallon graduated from the Maryland Institute College of Art, attended the Skowhegan School and is an M.F.A. graduate of the Yale University School of Art. She has exhibited widely in group shows around NYC, most recently at the Equity gallery, The Painting Center and The National Arts Club. Other venues include a solo show at the University of South Carolina Aiken at the Etheridge Gallery. In 2019 Camilla co-curated a show with Kylie Heidenheimer about fractured and fragmented space in contemporary painting entitled *Incise, Echo and Repeat* at the Abrazo Gallery at The Clemente Center on the Lower East Side in Manhattan. Camilla has written for *Painters on Painting*, a short piece for *Hyperallergic* and several articles for a now defunct blog, *NYCWPB* and *Anything Else*. Camilla's work is well represented in both private and corporate collections including Yale University and Capital Crossing. Early in her career she received many artist Fellowships notably from Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony. Camilla lives and works in Manhattan and Connecticut.

Mia Feroletto is a well-known art advisor, activist and artist who divides her time between Vermont and South Dakota. She was the creator of A SHELTER FROM THE STORM: ARTISTS FOR THE HOMELESS OF NEW YORK and ARTWALK NY, an annual event for Coalition for the Homeless that has been copied all around the country since beginning in 1995. Feroletto has organized numerous benefit auctions and large-scale special events at major auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's and has served on the board of directors of such organizations as Dance Theater Workshop and Sculpture Center. She served on the board of directors of the Tatanka Ska Insti-

tute, the Indigenous school being founded by Paula Looking Horse, wife of Chief Arvol Looking Horse, the Keeper of the sacred White Buffalo Calf Woman Pipe. She is the publisher of *New Observations Magazine*, the producer/creator of HEMP NY CITY, a partner in the founding of the Thunderheart Center for the Arts in Wasta, South Dakota and the creator and producer of the Consciousness and Contact conferences that have received world-wide recognition. She is the host of the *New Observations* podcast on *Unknown Country*, the channel for all things Whitley Strieber. Feroletto is a committed animal rights and animal welfare activist. She is determined to maximize visibility for the arts and our cultural world and is currently developing the Adopt an Artist Program to send artists to destinations around the globe in order to create and develop their art. She can be reached at mia.feroletto@gmail.com

Donna Gustafson is the Interim Director and Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University. Her publications and exhibition projects at the Zimmerli include *Tiananmen Square, 1989: Photographs by Kiang H. Hei* (2019); *Subjective Objective: A Century of Social Photography* (2017); *Jessie Krimes: Apokaluptein: 16389067* (2014); *Rachel Perry Welty 24/7* (2012); *at/around/beyond: Fluxus at Rutgers* (2011); *Water* (2010) and *Lalla Essaydi: Les femmes du Maroc* (2010). She is author with Gerry Beegan of *Angela Davis: Seize the Time* (2020) and with Andrés Mario Zervigón of *Subjective Objective: A Century of Social Photography* (Hirmer, 2017), and the author of *George Segal in Black and White: Photographs by Donald Lokuta* (Zimmerli, 2015), *Amelia and the Animals: The Photographs of Robin Schwartz* (Aperture, 2014), *Almost Human: Dolls and Robots in Contemporary Art* (Hunterdon Art Museum, 2005), and *Images from the World Between: The Circus in Twentieth-Century American Art* (MIT Press, 2001). She has published reviews and articles, presented papers, and participated in symposia and panels on a variety of topics in photography, American, and contemporary art. Her exhibition on the image and texts of the American activist and scholar Angela Davis was on view at the Zimmerli Art Museum through June 15, 2021.

Bobby Hedglin-Taylor's career spans four decades and multiple disciplines including circus, clowning, theater, dance, ballet, film and television. Bobby joined STREB as the Director of the España-STREB Trapeze Academy 16 years ago and his role has grown to encompass the organization's party, rental and corporate training events. He is a sought after aerial coach who has trained cast members and replacements for the hit Broadway revival of *Pippin*, including Patina Miller and Andrea Martin for their Tony award-winning roles. He also trained Tony award-nominee Rob McClure on tightrope for the 2012 Broadway musical *Chaplin*. Off-Broadway, he brought circus aerial to the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Classic Stage Company starring Bebe Neuwirth and Christina Ricci, and his aerial choreography has been featured in *Broadway Bares*, Broadway Cares' annual AIDS fundraiser; and he's the cirque choreographer on the Holland America Cruise Lines. As an aerial sequence designer Bobby has designed 29 productions of the musical *Barnum*, as well as training and sequencing for shows including *Aida*, *Disney's Tarzan*, *Carnival*, *Thomas the Tank Engine Live*, *Madagascar Live* and *Annie Get Your Gun*. As a performer, Bobby has appeared with the rock band PHISH in their surprise New Year's Eve performances in 2012 and 2018 as well as on the small screen in reality shows including *Marriage Ref*, *Wife Swap*, *Fashion Emergency*, *Matched in Manhattan*, *What Not to Wear* and on *Inside Edition*, *NY1*, *WNBC News*, *WPIX News* and more. Prior to his work in circus, Bobby was a staple in musical theater in shows like *A Wonderful Life*, *Cabaret*, *42nd Street*, *Singing in the Rain*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *A Chorus Line*. His former students have performed all over the world in shows including the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus, Cirque Du Soleil, Disney Parks, Sea World, Hershey Park, Busch Gardens, Disney on Ice, The Pickle Family Circus and the Big Apple Circus.

Julie Heffernan is an American painter whose artwork has been described by the writer Rebecca Solnit as "a new kind of history painting" and by The New Yorker as "ironic rococo surrealism with a social-satirical twist." Heffernan received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting and Printmaking from University of California at Santa Cruz and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree at

Yale School of Art and Architecture. She is a Professor of Fine Arts at Montclair State University and currently lives in Brooklyn, New York. Heffernan is the founder and editor of the blog *Painters on Paintings*. In 2011, Heffernan was inducted into the National Academy of Design in New York and in 2014, elected to the Board of Governors. She was granted a 2021 Fellowship from New York Foundation for the Arts and is a 2017 Fellow of the BAU Institute at the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France; was awarded the Meridian Scholar Artist-in-Residence Fellowship from the University of Tampa in Florida and was the featured artist for the 2017 MacDowell Colony. In 2013, Heffernan was awarded a Milton And Sally Avery Fellowship at MacDowell and in 2012, she was invited to be the Lee Ellen Fleming Artist-in-Residence at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. In 2010, she was the Commencement Speaker for the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and in 2009, she was the featured artist at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts grant, a New York Foundation for the Arts grant, a Fulbright-Hayes grant to Berlin, since 1999, Heffernan has had more than 50 solo exhibitions at museums and other venues across the United States and abroad. Her work is represented in 25 museum and institutional collections. She has been represented by Catharine Clark Gallery since 2005.

Phoebe Hoban has written about culture and the arts for a variety of publications, including *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *ARTnews*, and *The New York Observer*, among others. She is the author of three artist biographies: *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (Viking/Penguin 1998; 2004; *Open Road*, 2016) a national bestseller and a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year; *Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty*, (St. Martin's Press, 2010) named one of the best books of the year by *New York Magazine*, *The Village Voice*, and *Booklist*; and *Lucian Freud: Eyes Wide Open*, (New Harvest, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014). A paperback edition of her Neel biography with a new introduction was published by David Zwirner Books in April 2021.

Cassandra Joseph was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. Her investigation in movement began at the age of four with

the sport of gymnastics. Over a span of twenty years as a competitive gymnast, she earned several state and regional titles. She graduated from Cornell University with a B.A. in English Literature and studied journalism at Temple University's graduate communications program. She joined STREB in 2007 as an instructor and company member and when she is not seen in a rehearsal or teaching classes at SLAM, she has been seen ziplining across the Park Avenue Armory, scaling the walls of the Bergdorf building and dancing on the spokes of the London Eye. In addition to her performance work with the company Cassandra is the Creative Director of the STREB Kid Company since 2010. For the STREB Kid Company, she has choreographed and self-produced three evening length works: *Heroes* (2015), *Momentum* (2016) and *Navigation* (2017). For the past 6 years she has acted as STREB's education liaison. In September 2017, Cassandra Joseph was appointed Associate Artistic Director of STREB Extreme Action and is now in charge of overseeing SLAM's education program. She is a strong believer in the transformative power of movement and is passionate about empowering young people to push boundaries and expand their notions of what is possible. Cassandra is grateful to do what she loves everyday and to work for a real life genius! When she is not creating action events at STREB, she can be found training her daughter Nia to be a mini-action hero.

Deborah Kaufmann, Bennington '74, Co-Founder & Director of Training and Education, Health Humor Inc. Deborah is a pioneer and leader in the burgeoning profession of healthcare clowning. She was a founding member of Big Apple Circus Clown Care (BACC) where it started in 1987. In 2016 she co-founded Healthy Humor, an arts organization whose professional performers create moments of joy, wonder, laughter and comfort for hospitalized children and all others who are most in need. As part of Healthy Humor's Red Nose Docs, "Dr. Dibble" brings her own brand of buffoonery to children and their caregivers in the NY Metro area. She has more day-to-day, on-the-floor experience than any other healthcare clown, worldwide. In addition, she is responsible for the recruitment, vetting and training of Red Nose Docs performers, while also guiding ongoing artistic development and staying cur-

rent on relevant research about the arts in healthcare. "Dr. Dibble" has been featured in many television programs, including *The Today Show*, *Healing Quest*, and *Chicago Hope*. Deborah was instrumental in training many of the artists who have founded their own healthcare clowning organizations in the US and around the world. She teaches and presents about healthcare clowning internationally and domestically. Deborah served as the Artistic Director and co-writer of The Betes Organization (www.thebetesorg) until 2016. The Betes mission was to help people with chronic conditions form a functioning and flourishing relationship with their health, through unique and effective theater-driven programming. As the tuba player for The Baltic Street Blowards she played NYC Parks, Symphony Space and Avery Fisher Hall. She tours her solo clown and puppetry works at theaters and festivals in the US and internationally.

Walter Kuhn was a US artist, born in 1877 in New York City. In addition to paintings, he produced cartoons, drawings, prints, and sculptures over the course of his career. He became an illustrator during a trip to California, then spent two years in Europe studying art. Upon his return to the US in 1903, he began working as an illustrator, all the while exhibiting his drawings and paintings; in 1913 he helped to organize that year's famous Armory show. He is best known for his boldly-painted, stirring portraits of circus and vaudeville entertainers, examples of which are included in most major American art collections. He died in New York in 1949.

Oskar Schlemmer was born in 1888 in Stuttgart, Germany, as a youth worked in an inlay workshop, served in WW1 was injured and afterward stayed in the military as a cartographer. He later study studied painting at the Akademie der Bildenden in Stuttgart. He moved to Berlin and in 1920 was invited by Walter Gropius to teach at the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau where he stayed until 1929. He then took a job at the Art Academy in Breslau where he painted *Bauhaus Stairway*. He was forced to resign and was declared degenerate by the Nazis, and remained in obscurity for the last ten years of his life.

Peter Schumann is the co-founder and director of the Bread and Puppet Theater. Born in Silesia, he was a sculptor and danc-

er in Germany before moving to the United States in 1961. In 1963 he founded Bread and Puppet Theater in New York City, and in 1970 moved to the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, eventually settling in Glover, Vermont, where the company still performs. Schumann's best-known work is the Domestic Resurrection Circus, performed annually by the Bread and Puppet Theater until 1998. Thousands of people flock to Glover each summer to experience the joy of their live performances and break bread with people from around the world.

Barry Schwabsky is art critic for *The Nation* and co-editor of international reviews for *Arforum*. His new book of poetry, *Feelings of And*, is forthcoming from Black Square Editions, New York.

Elizabeth Streb MacArthur "Genius" Award-winner, Elizabeth Streb has dived through glass, allowed a ton of dirt to fall on her head, walked down the outside of London's City Hall, and set herself on fire, among other feats of extreme action. Her popular book, *STREB: How to Become an Extreme Action Hero*, was made into a hit documentary, *Born to Fly* directed by Catherine Gund (Aubin Pictures), which premiered at SXSW and received an extended run at The Film Forum in New York City in 2014. Streb founded the STREB Extreme Action Company in 1979. In 2003, she established SLAM, the STREB Lab for Action Mechanics, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. SLAM's garage doors are always open: anyone and everyone can come in, watch rehearsals, take classes, and learn to fly. Elizabeth Streb was invited to present a TED Talk ('My Quest To Defy Gravity and Fly') at TED 2018: THE AGE OF AMAZEMENT. She has been a featured speaker presenting her keynote lectures at such places as the Rubin Museum of Art (in conversation with Dr. John W. Krakauer), TEDxMET, the Institute for Technology and Education (ISTE), POPTECH, the Institute of Contemporary Art (in conversation with physicist, Brian Greene), The Brooklyn Museum of Art (in conversation with author A.M. Homes), the National Performing Arts Convention, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (AAPA), the Penny Stamps Speaker Series at the University of Michigan, Chorus America, the University of Utah, and as a Caroline Werner Gannett Project speaker in Rochester NY, among others.

Rough and Tumble, Alec Wilkinson's profile of Elizabeth Streb appeared in *The New*

Yorker magazine in June, 2015.

Streb received the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation 'Genius' Award in 1997. She holds a Master of Arts in Humanities and Social Thought from New York University, a Bachelor of Science in Modern Dance from SUNY Brockport, and honorary doctorates from SUNY Brockport, Rhode Island College and Otis College of Art and Design. Streb has received numerous other awards and fellowships including the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1987; a Brandeis Creative Arts Award in 1991; two New York Dance and Performance Awards (Bessie Awards), in 1988 and 1999 for her "sustained investigation of movement," a Doris Duke Artist Award in 2013; and over 30 years of on-going support from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In 2009, Streb was the Danspace Project Honoree. She served on Mayor Bloomberg's Cultural Affairs Advisory Commission and is a member of the board of the Jerome Foundation.

Major commissions for choreography include: Lincoln Center Festival, Jazz at Lincoln Center, MOCA, LA Temporary Contemporary, the Whitney Museum of Art, Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts, the Park Avenue Armory, London 2012, the Cultural Olympiad for the Summer Games, CityLab Paris 2018, the opening of Bloomberg's new headquarters in London, Musée D'Orsay, the re-opening of the Théâtre du Châtelet, and the Louvre Abu Dhabi. *Born to Fly* aired on PBS on May 11, 2014 and is currently available on iTunes, OXO, directed by Craig Lowy, which follows STREB at the 2012 London Olympics, premiered at the IFC theater in New York City on February 2, 2016. Streb and her company have also been featured in *PopAction* by Michael Blackwood, on PBS's *In The Life* and *Great Performances*, *The David Letterman Show*, *BBC World News*, *CBS Sunday Morning*, *CBS This Morning*, *Business Insider*, *CNN's Weekend Today*, MTV, on the National Public Radio shows *Studio 360* and *Science Friday*, and on *Larry King Live*.

Brenda Zlamany is a painter who lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. Since 1982 her work has appeared in numerous solo and group exhibitions in the United States, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei; the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; the New York Historical Society; the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art; the Museum

of Contemporary Art, Denver; Frankfurter Kunstverein, Germany; the National Museum, Gdansk, Poland; and the Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent, Belgium. Her work is held in the collections of the Cincinnati Art Museum, Deutsche Bank, the Neuberger Museum of Art, Yale University, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Art. She has received portrait commissions from the World Bank, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, *The New York Times Magazine*, Yale University, Rockefeller University, and other institutions. Grants that she has received include a Fulbright Fellowship, a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant, a New York Foundation for the Arts Artists' Fellowship in painting, and a Jerome Foundation Fellowship.



Kids-Trapeze

Photo courtesy of STREB, photographer unknown

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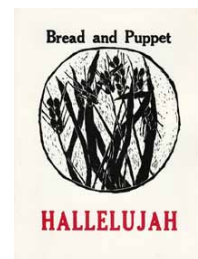
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Peter Schumann's graphic artworks are distributed across Bread & Puppet's many activities, and as a whole make up the theater's distinct aesthetic identity. Beginning in the early 1980s the Bread & Puppet Press has been channeling Schumann's prolific output of artworks in the forms of posters, banners, books, cards, and other print based media. Our emphasis is on utilitarian uses of art, for such vital activities as celebration, decoration, information, argumentation, rumination- and puppetry!

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