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TBA report: aggressive whimsey, meditative chaos, kinetic violin

Martha Daghljan reviews performances by Laura Ortman, Takashi Makino, and Asher Hartman and Gawdafful National Theater

September 17, 2019 // [CULTURE](#), [VISUAL ART](#) // [Oregon ArtsWatch](#)

PICA's Time Based Art Festival (TBA) was held at locations around Portland from September 5th through 15th. The festival brings together a diverse roster of artists and performances. Martha Daghljan reviews three notable offerings.

by MARTHA DAGHLIAN

Laura Ortman (with Marcus Fischer and Raven Chacon)
Lincoln Hall
1620 SW Park Ave
September 6 & 7

Brooklyn-based violinist Laura Ortman (White Mountain Apache) brought her intense experimental style to Lincoln Hall in two performances for the 2019 TBA festival. Ortman was accompanied by Portland artist Marcus Fischer and by her frequent collaborator Raven Chacon (Diné) of New Mexico. A prominent figure in experimental and Native music scenes, Ortman has been developing her unique sound for decades but has recently garnered international acclaim for her video [“My Soul Remainer”](#) which was included in this year's Whitney Biennial (In fact, all three performers were featured artists in the Biennial; Ortman and Fischer as solo artists and Chacon as part of the arts collective Postcommodity.)



Laura Ortman. Courtesy of PICA.

Saturday night's set began with the dim stage backlit by blazing red light and the slowly building buzz and rumble of looped and distorted guitar and synthesizer. Ortman commenced the evening by uttering a few garbled proclamations into a loudspeaker that sounded like the muffled, staticky voices of a radio station just out of range.

From then on, Ortman danced around the stage tirelessly, accenting her playing with dramatic lunges and sidesteps. She moved almost frantically at times but maintained a sense of deep focus even in her freneticism. She scribbled away at her instrument as though trying to set it on fire by friction and at one point carried this sentiment to an extreme when she scraped an alternate violin against a mic'd-up panel of wood covered in sandpaper. The sound was nearly unbearable. Then, finally, she picked up the board and knocked it on the stage to release a small pile of sawdust. She tapped and thumped her instrument like a bizarre drum and used a wooden whistle to evoke the tones of a train, a bird, or an idle human. Her playing veered from screeching to cinematic to sweetly melodic, driven by her insistent kinetic energy.

Accompanying Ortman's forceful performance were Fischer and Chacon's heavy (and heavily distorted) guitar/synth/tape loop combo, which, though compelling in their own right, at times threatened to completely obscure the headlining artist's efforts. In contrast to much of Ortman's recorded music, which allows the listener to hear every affecting nuance and note she plays, the show at Lincoln Hall was dominated by the monolithic dronescape that continued almost unbroken for the full 90 minutes. Ortman's violin was like a small bird flying through a hurricane, variously engulfed by clouds and shoved to and fro by the wind. Whether this was a conscious decision within the three performers' collaborative process or the result of the way the venue's sound was mixed, it was hard to dismiss the possibility that listeners might be missing out on a certain level of sonic detail. The wall-of-noise effect became slightly monotonous after a certain point, making the moments when Ortman took over feel all the more exquisite.

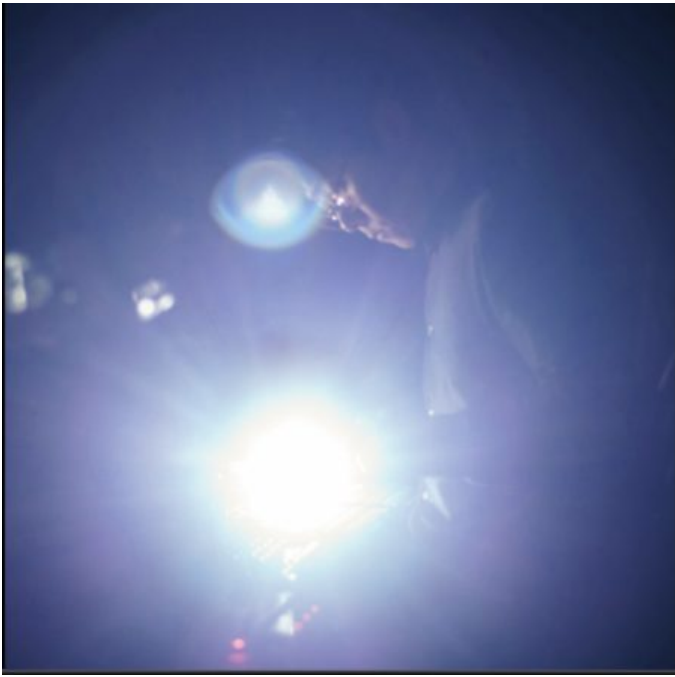
***Memento Stella*, Takashi Makino**

OMSI

1945 SE Water Ave

September 14 & 15

Memento Stella, according to Japanese filmmaker Takashi Makino, means "remember we are stars." It is also the title of his most recent work which TBA screened at OMIS's Empirical Theater over the weekend. Makino's work is decidedly abstract and has evolved from Stan Brakhage-style direct film manipulation in his early career to his current mode of intricately layered digital footage and lens effects that create wildly flickering hypnotic textures on the screen. *Memento Stella* is his longest film to date with a run time of 60 minutes. For the Sunday evening showing I attended, the artist was present to perform a live soundtrack on synthesizer. The piece was composed by Reinier van Houdt, who also performed at Saturday's screening.



Takashi Makino. Courtesy of PICA.

The audience was warned at the outset that although we might recognize specific images, the idea was to relax into the visual chaos and let our minds drift free from representation or narrative. The film began with tiny twinkling shards of light on a black background that resembled a more lively version of television static or perhaps stars moving at warp speed or a cloud of agitated dust particles viewed in raking light. We weren't supposed to worry about making visual associations but I couldn't help myself. It took some time to fully settle in and stop trying to make sense of what we were seeing (was that water? It had to be water!) but eventually the vast field of vibrating, swirling forms and particles began to feel absorbing and meditative. Tiny patterns and broad motions clashed and harmonized in turn. The experience was akin to the start of a psychedelic trip or the moment you fall asleep, only to be suddenly startled awake. Makino's live performance of van Houdt's soundtrack was also ambient, but its composition contained subtle peaks and valleys that prevented the sonic fatigue that can accompany noise music.

At certain moments the total immersion became nearly overwhelming and a sort of existential dread crept in to the point that I actually felt afraid for a moment. After the show, other audience members reported having similar feelings of anxiety or foreboding and we all agreed that we felt a bit altered. It was as though we had all had a strange dream together. Maybe the experience wasn't always relaxing, but it was powerful and unique, and isn't that what art is supposed to be?

***The Dope Elf* (Asher Hartman and the Gawdafful National Theater)**

[Yale Union](#)

800 SE 10th Ave

Additional Performances: September 20, 21 & 22; October 11, 12 & 13; October 18, 19 & 20

Doors open 7:30 PM / Showtime 8:00 PM

The Dope Elf, the latest production of Los Angeles artist Asher Hartman's excellent Gawdafful National Theater Company, kicked off its month-long run at Yale Union during TBA's second weekend. It stands out as one of the weirder and more exciting works featured in this year's festival. Hartman and his crew have transformed Yale Union into a fey sort of "trailer park" in which handmade, treehouse-like structures and repurposed garbage/sculpture hybrids are scattered throughout the cavernous gallery. The company are artists-in-residence in the literal sense – they have been living on set since the production began and will continue to do so through the final performance on October 20. *The Dope Elf* is a three-part show that unfolds over three consecutive evenings each weekend of the run; I saw what was described as a modified version of Play 1 in a media preview performance. (A 24-hour live stream can be found on the [gallery's website](#).) Before the show started, Hartman addressed the audience. He explained that the players would be moving around the gallery throughout the evening, and that he would lead us to the next location after each scene. This roving action resulted in a rather fluid barrier between performer and viewer that was fun and kept everyone alert as we tried to avoid inadvertently stumbling into the spotlight.



The Dope Elf publicity image. Courtesy of PICA.

The show began when Michael Bonnabel jumped onto a platform surrounded by faux arcade game consoles made from cardboard boxes (including “Street Frighter” and “Donkey Dong”) and tore into an acidic monologue about a pretentious fellow referred to as “the actor.” Slowly it became apparent that the actor in question was Bonnabel himself – or the character he was playing – which was our first indication of the multiple layers of meaning and identity contained within this rowdy performance.

The next scene found Bonnabel sitting in one half of a two-bedroom shanty, engaged in a petty domestic squabble with John (played by Philip Littell). From there, the energetic cast transformed themselves into trolls, wolves, aunties, actors, depressed trailer-park residents, concerned family members, and death itself. Zut Lors gave a brief but standout performance as Gingy, a trailer-park troll. Lors is a gifted physical comedian whose facial expressions and excellent timing were genuinely funny, which can be hard to come by in contemporary performance art. She reappeared later as one half of a couple (or siblings? roommates?) opposite Joe Seely and was compelling even in that more subdued role, relaxed in her lines and her movements.

Although there was a superficial gloss of wacky humor throughout (particularly in the instance of Gingy’s deranged stand-up routine), the underlying tone was one of deep metaphysical disturbances. The wretchedness reached a nadir in a scene in which Bonnabel (perhaps playing Michael, the actor) holds another man (played by Paul Outlaw) hostage in his bedroom, commanding him to remove and replace articles of clothing, psychotically singing love songs to him while mimicking sexual acts, and threatening to tape his mouth shut before the scene fades out. From my vantage point, I was able to see Bonnabel discreetly remove a length of rope and a set of kitchen knives from a duffle bag at the start of the scene (not everyone would have seen this, I just happened to be standing directly behind the actor), and as a result I spent the entire scene worried that we were about to witness a gruesome fictional murder. To my relief, the action never devolved into that sort of spectacle, but that doesn’t mean the audience was spared any discomfort.

And then there was the titular Dope Elf, played with aggressive whimsy by Jacqueline Wright. The Elf described itself as “a system” whose DNA test results read zero and who seemed to veer from victim to monster to average-joe within the space of a few wild run-on sentences. Within Hartman’s creation, the Dope Elf’s particular brand of “magic” represents the systems and disguises of white supremacy that delude and torture the rest of the characters in the play. The Elf’s confounding lack of identity evokes the supposedly neutral status of whiteness both in racial terms and in the rarefied space of contemporary art, where the white cube of the gallery bestows institutional legitimacy upon its contents.



Jacqueline Wright as the Dope Elf. Courtesy of PICA.

The Elf made several bizarre appearances throughout the performance, but her final monologue was truly memorable. In a tirade of convoluted and vulgar poetic logic, the Dope Elf managed to communicate the theoretical gist of the work – that living within systems of violence and power leaves people with what Yale Union curator Dena Beard describes as “strangled desire, residual fear, and rage.” The split personalities of the show’s actors were suddenly revealed as reflections of unstable identities locked in a struggle for power, whether magical or political. With that, the spell was lifted and the members of the Gawdafful National Theater Company stepped onto the stage and took a bow.

Martha Daghlilian is a Portland-based visual artist and arts writer. She is the creator of the [Grapefruit Juice Artist Resource Guide](#), a Portland arts directory. More information and work can be found at [marthadaghlilian.com](#)

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Not Ours Alone Sept 5th-Oct 27th



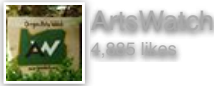
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