Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Art, Music in Raleigh and its Protest Against White Supremacy

Samuel · Wednesday, August 23rd, 2017

Tuesday night, 8/15, downtown Raleigh, and though South Mcdowell street is a main artery running north and south through the city, the traffic flows, which I'm not accustomed to coming from Manhattan where traffic jitters, honkings and crazy taxis weaving an inch from you is every night fare and a sign of the city's vitality. Next to the frenetic bustling of New York, Raleigh's sauntering feels like slow death. I look for parking and find it within two blocks, and it's free. I appreciate this convenience though. In New York, parking would've been half of my paycheck.

I take half a flight of stairs down to IMURJ, a coffee shop, slash, bar, slash, gallery, slash, music venue tucked in a half basement of a warehouse. On the street level, a three feet orange banner and a chalked A stand sign on the sidewalk announcing the evening's Open Jam session hints at activity below the relatively deserted streets. My wife, Suyun, and I, open the door and greet Kenneth, the art manager. He has the look of an artist too busy to care for fashion, light blond hair pony tailed for convenience, which itself is fashionable. We got to know him only a month ago, and we asked him if we, before our imminent relocation out of Raleigh we've come to love, can do a last minute exhibition at IMURJ with Suyun's artworks at Castalia that was finishing its run, hoping for sales, less canvas to transport and little cash for the road. To our surprise, Kenneth said "yes" then planned a whole evening party for her. This is Kenneth, this is IMURJ, this is Raleigh, immediate family welcome for fellow artists, southern hospitality in a bohemian look.

[alert type=alert-white]Please consider making a tax-deductible donation now so we can keep publishing strong creative voices.[/alert]

So Tuesday night is Opoen Jam and farewell party for Suyun. They promoted it in their web page with a link to her site. At the entrance table, Kenneth laid out a cool retro-artsy book for people to sign in. "I saw your website and had to come down to look," says an aspiring local artist with a 10 month old girl slung on her shoulders. IMURJ has made my wife into a star, and I bask in her glory.

When you enter IMURJ, you see a bar serving coffee in the afternoon and alcohol in the evening, but I assume you can get both any time of the day. To the left is a stage with the four essential instruments of modern music: drum, guitar, bass and keys. The stage is close enough to the gathered to create coziness, but spotlights and slight elevation frames the stage as a space worth paying attention to – a social experiment with the virtuoso violinist Joshua Bell playing in a subway station proved that without a stage people will ignore a violinist who packs Carnegie Hall.

To the left of this stage is a brick wall colored black where they run exhibits. Brick is avant garde,

and black is the new white for art shows. And hung on hooks that cling to wires running from floor to ceiling is Suyun's art work. Even in our garage where she worked, I saw their potential, but against the black wall, their colors pop. "Flight at Outer Banks," my favorite, really takes flight (apologies for the pun), its large stroke of black circle that spans two large 40" canvases begin to swirl.

Paul, the program manager appoints me to start the evening. I don't bother to ask him if he worries I might lack stage experience. But then I asked him if I could read poems so he must've been assuming anyone crazy enough to volunteer to read a poem got to have some experience, and if not, his rashness will be good for a laugh. This breakdown of performer and participant even while elevating the performer/artist, this flow of seeing and being seen, is the energy of IMURJ. This artist's assembly is a community. People don't just come to see art; they make art too. On one table is a long parchment paper rolled out and spread out on it are all the instruments humans use to make their marks –crayons,paint brushes, chalks — and people have gathered around it making art in their corner of the paper. It's both personal and communal art. Art has not been professionalized, only elevated.

I go up the stage, the spotlight making the audience barely visible, and thank IMURJ, Kenneth, and then read my poem. This might be self-adulation, but I kick ass. I hear laughs where I expect them. I hear some "ahem." Pictures taken by a good friend show some applauding with finger snaps, which says "You go on, don't let me interrupt you, but you got my whole soul!" It's the first time I'm reading my poems in public and I'm hooked. Poetry, like music, is performative. Music isn't music as notations. It's music only when a string is strummed. So is poetry. Poetry needs larynx and ears more than eyes.

After the music, Oak City Jam, the guest band, which is local, performs two songs that rock the room which is now crowded with people. People are swilling beer or sipping wine, tapping feet, drawing, singing along, dancing, talking, listening, humming, and…there is definitely bustle here.

After they finish, Open Jam session beings. Anyone can come up. They only need to write their name and the instrument on a sheet. When their names are called and they come up to improvise on the spot. The house band starts the improv and they are good. The ad-hoc band that follows is pretty good too. The music made on the spot is impressive. I'm not sure how they communicate any chord progression to each other — hidden antennas that grow from music exposure? — but they start jamming.

Music is grooving and with the sweet influence of my second beer, I'm grooving too. Suyun is talking about art with a young couple, the contrasting horizon opened by realism and abstraction.

—

It's been three days since the tragedy in Charlottesville, where we saw the face of White supremacy, brazen and intentionally fear inducing, eyes flickering with the red of their torches and hatred, the essence of their movement captured in their chants. Chants are reductionistic and in that sense are inaccurate expression of a philosophy of a movement. In the case of White Supremacists, the chants seem to be spot on, for the philosophy of the White Supremacist is reductionistic; life reduced to slogans, its simplicity is its pull. The world will be right when Whites rule and Jews are banished. Their chant is their philosophy, and hatred is their fuel. There is no music in their chant or art in their action, but it's a community, strong, powerful, singular and destructive.

The community of IMURJ, and the party they threw for my wife and the Open Jam where all musicians are welcomed to take the stage, is the very opposite of the gathering in Emancipation (no literature can make a more ironic scene) Park. IMURJ is the opposite of the White Supremacists. Without meaning to, by its very openness IMURJ is a protest, and by its very being, prove their chants wrong.

Open Jam.

Name and Instrument.

Your name is called. You take out your bass. You go up not knowing who you going to play with, but once up, the drum gives you a beat and a guitar is flanging, and you hear their music as well as yours, and you pluck, and the differences become the very possibility of music.

—

This is the poem I got most finger snaps for.

America my America

Though you say I am not yours,

though you pissed all over my front door

with your black graffiti hissing

“Go back home chink!”

you are still my America.

Because I believe in you,

not in your greatness

but in your capacity to repent.

Though you think you are great — drunk with blood,

and puke your vulgarity, you are still my America.

For when you are sober, you are an inspired poet.

Your song of independence is painfully beautiful.

Though you don’t believe in your own rhetoric, I

believe in the words that constitute you, my doubting poet,

that we are all endowed by the creator with inalienable

rights no nation can deny, not even you, America.

For they are not your words which you can

undo or redo for words are greater than the poets that borrow them.

And one day, those words will cut your heart.

America, you are my America because you are a dreamer.

Did you not raise your young hands against the Behemoth Britain

because you dreamed of a land where lady Liberty called

the poor and the refugees into her shores,

shining an inviting light through the open seas?

We call it the American Dream, but it is older than you America.

Older than all your contradictions and nightmares,

Older than your Jim Crow laws and burning crosses,

Older than the Trans Atlantic slave trade, older than the

Red Man’s decimation, older than the rise of people who call themselves white,

older than nations fattening into apotheosis and rapaciousness.

Prophet King did not awaken the dream.

King was awakened by the dream.

It was in Hughes for it is older

than the rivers in his body;

Old as the Tigris and Euphrates.

It gave visions to Crazy Horse,

of all races gathered around the tree of life,

singing the same song in different tongues.

It inspired Whitman to see in the grass,

the soul of the black and white in the same soil,

his life continuing to life on the boot soles,

the journey-work of the stars.

It stirred in Sojourner Truth

her song to go home as a meteorite.

It was the dream of Abraham, that both his sons

would put down their swords and lay him to the ground as brothers.

The dream is as old as Adam and Eve

who dreamed of Cain and Abel returning home for dinner.

One day, you will see me and see the error of your ways.

You will repent, that ancient practice of grasping Dream’s wings,

and I will welcome you home.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, August 23rd, 2017 at 11:00 pm and is filed under Lifestyle, Visual Art
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.