

# NEA ARTS

NUMBER 4 2013



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## About this Issue

Author Jack London once wrote, “Don’t loaf and invite inspiration; light out after it with a club.” These words imply what most artists already know: that inspiration is not a divine force that flows unbidden. Instead, it is the result of continuous work, research, and observation. Although the proverbial “Aha!” moment does arise on occasion, the process that spurs this moment is where the true creative magic lies.

In this issue, we spoke with artists across the disciplines about inspiration, and how it figures into their creative endeavors. How do they define inspiration, and where do they seek it? Who inspires them, and whom do they hope to inspire? How is fresh inspiration found within familiar themes, and conversely, what happens when the usual sources of inspiration suddenly run dry? The answers we received from those we interviewed were, not surprisingly, altogether inspiring. As Marc Bamuthi Joseph, who coined “inspiration quotient” in his interview, noted, “If you’re doing it right, it’s all inspired work.”

All the pieces in this issue showcase the artists in their own words. For expanded interviews and additional online content, please visit us at [arts.gov](http://arts.gov).

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# **SHERMAN ALEXIE** **PLAINSPOKEN** **INSPIRATION**

INTERVIEW BY REBECCA GROSS

According to poet, author, and filmmaker Sherman Alexie, “A lot of Native literature is really foo-foo nature crap, and it’s written by Indians who don’t even live that way.” Alexie’s own work, however, stays far away from the mythologized, spiritual stereotypes surrounding Native Americans, and focuses instead on the realities he grew up with on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington, which ran thick with poverty, alcoholism, and hopelessness. In Alexie’s hands however, these relentless heart-breaks are transformed into lyrical, moving portraits of contemporary Native life, which have garnered the writer a PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, a PEN/Malamud Award for Short Fiction, a National Book Award for Young People’s Literature, and an NEA Literature Fellowship. We recently spoke with Alexie by phone to hear his thoughts on inspiration, and the role it plays in his creative practice.

## **WHAT IS INSPIRATION?**

Everything gets written down, everything gets remembered, everything gets catalogued. I don’t

have that immediate inspiration very often. It is having a moment, a phrase, a line of dialogue and then writing it down and hanging on to it.

Sherman Alexie. PHOTO BY WILL AUSTIN

The inspiration is later when two of those things collide. Then you have to run to a computer, or run to a notebook. That's when it gets exciting, when two things come together that way.... I guess you'd say inspiration is something that makes me want to write it down. It's something that makes you want to ask more questions about it.

## **WHERE INSPIRATION LINGERS**

[Inspiration] is everywhere all of the time. I don't turn it off. I was in New York a few years back and I was walking back to my hotel late night after a literary party, and I saw a 24-hour nail salon. I thought, "Wow, only in New York could you actually have a 24-hour nail salon." As I was walking by, three very lovely drag queens walked into the salon. It was like three in the morning, and they were done up. It was such an amazing moment. I couldn't figure out why they looked so good. Are they on their way to somewhere? Are they on their way back from somewhere? I ended up writing a short story about a 24-hour nail salon in Manhattan. So I can be just as influenced by 3 a.m. drag queens in New York City as I can by a powwow in Oklahoma.

I write about basketball and hot dogs and blue-collar jobs. It's plainspoken stuff. I'm not very interested in the ornate. There's a new house built in our neigh-

borhood and it's this modernist masterpiece-looking thing. It does nothing for me. But on the other hand, I wrote a short story because there was once a mattress in my neighborhood that somebody had tossed, and it sat on the curb forever. That abandoned mattress is infinitely more interesting than that house.

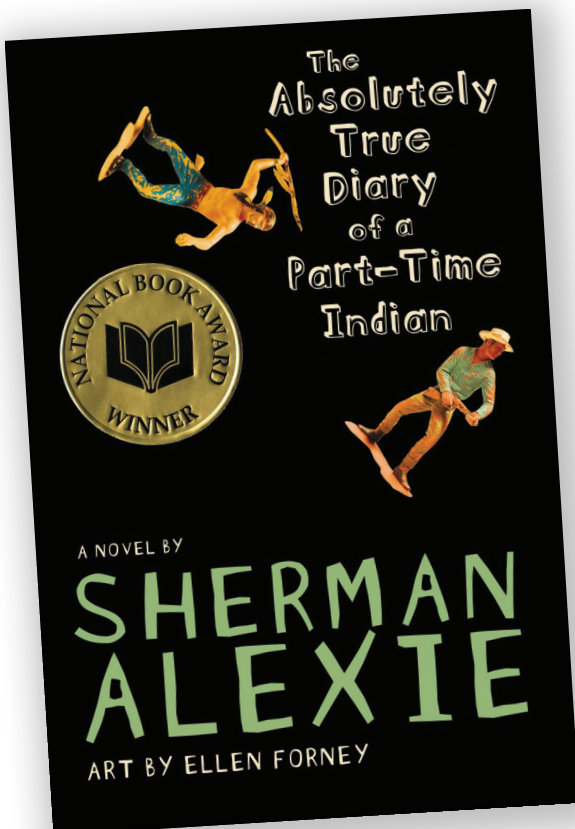
I was that mattress growing up. I'm a rez Indian. Every rez Indian is an abandoned mattress. When you start at the bottom you're looking at everything above you. When you're a prey animal, you study the horizon. Everything was a potential predator for me.

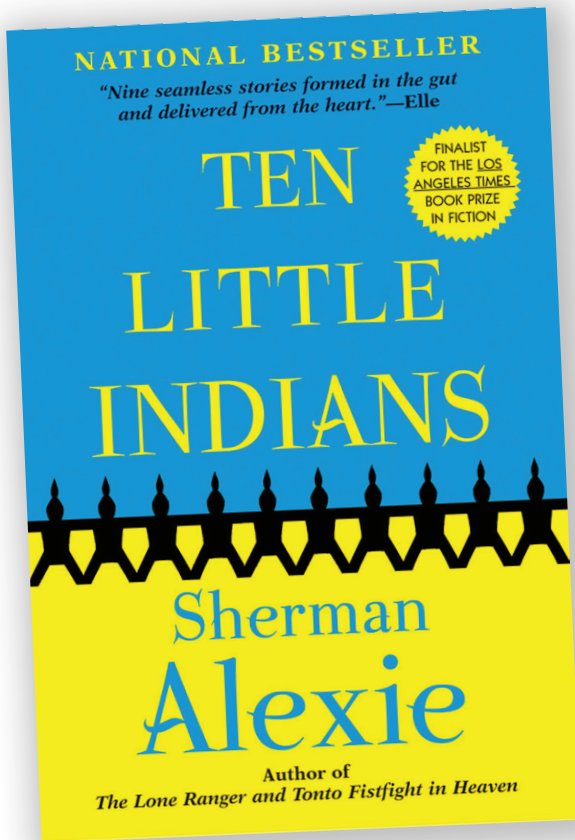
## **OUTSMARTING A LACK OF INSPIRATION**

If I'm not feeling inspired, I'll just grab a random book off the shelf and open it up. I have different shelves, and I pull it off my shelf of much beloved books and open it up randomly. I will transcribe that first paragraph I see. In fact, I'm just going to grab a random book off my shelf. What did I grab? Look at this, it's *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* [by Michael Chabon].

So random opening: "I decided to walk to the Weatherwoman House through the hot clear Monday morning. For some reason, many groups of men with tar-burning wagons were scattered across the rooftops of East Pittsburgh and the smell of tar made everything seem even hotter, more yellow, more intensely summer."

So what I would do is I would type that and keep typing until some idea gets to me. So as I was reading that, I started thinking, you know, I don't think I've ever written about hot tar. What I'm remembering is in high school in driver's ed, I was in a car with some classmates and we were stopped by a road crew. There was the guy with one of those signs. He had stopped us, and I said, "Man, that must be a good job being the sign guy, you get a lot of money and you just stand there all day." What I didn't know was that one of my classmates there, her dad did that stuff. I didn't mean to sound so judgmental, but it was. It really hurt her, and I didn't learn about it until a couple of years later when we dated for a while. We were in the backseat of my car half-clothed when she told me about how much it had hurt her feelings. So that's how I get inspired. I grab a sentence or two or even





a paragraph from somebody else’s book, and then that will lead me into something else of my own. So Michael Chabon’s hot tar led me to breaking the heart of a high school girl.

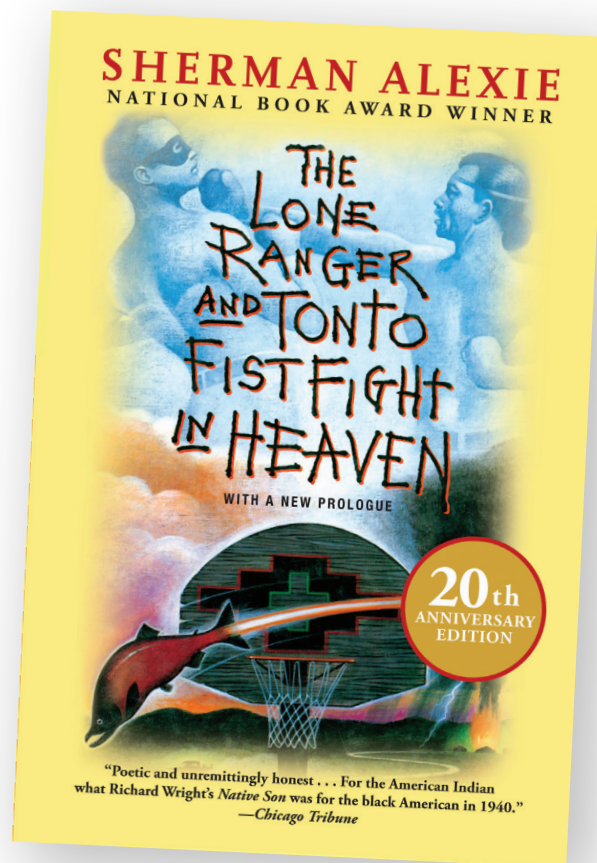
With poetry, one of the things I’ll do is I’ll take a very formal poem, let’s say a villanelle from Elizabeth Bishop. I’ll take one of her repeating lines, or from a Frost poem, I’ll take all of the end rhymes. If it’s a sonnet, I’ll take those 14 end words and I’ll lay them out on the page, and then I’ll write to those end words. Those same words will be the end words of all of my poetry lines. Nobody’s ever noticed that. I’ve published lots of poems with end lines from other people’s poems. I have all sorts of hidden stuff like that in the poetry—nobody’s ever noticed. There are many, many anagram notes to friends.

## **RETHINKING THE NATIVE-AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION**

I started college thinking I was going to become a pediatrician but couldn’t handle the actual body anatomy stuff of it. So I took a bunch of classes trying to figure out what to do. I took a poetry writing class and that was it.

[Adrian Louis] was my first experience of Native-American realism in literature. He’s the Hemingway of the Indian literary world, just straight-up, macho realism. I didn’t know a rez Indian’s life was important enough to write about, but also to be written about in such a direct and honest way.

The Indian literary world is so filled with the same kind of down-and-out Indians; I write about them too. Giving an Indian a white-collar job in a story creates the inspiration. I guess that’s one of the lucky things for me: almost anything I do as a Native-American writer is the first time a Native-American writer has done that. We’ve got a much shorter history of literature to be dealing with. It’s pretty exciting. I’m lucky. ▲



**ABOVE** | Sherman Alexie’s books *Ten Little Indians* and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* PHOTOS COURTESY OF GROVE ATLANTIC

**OPPOSITE** | Sherman Alexie’s book *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which won a National Book Award. COURTESY OF LITTLE, BROWN BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS



Brad Mehldau and Chris Thile at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland in April 2013. PHOTO BY DYLAN SINGLETON

# CHRIS THILE DAYS FULL OF MUSIC

INTERVIEW BY DON BALL

Chris Thile is a genius, at least according to the MacArthur Foundation, which awarded him a “genius” fellowship in 2012, making him one of the youngest recipients at age 31. A virtuoso on the mandolin, Thile started his career with the popular Grammy Award-winning group Nickel Creek before moving on to his current ensemble, Punch Brothers. Both groups subverted the idea of “bluegrass music,” creating a contemporary sound with the traditional instrumentation. In addition, he has played with a variety of musicians in other genres of music, including Yo-Yo Ma, Edgar Meyers, Stuart Duncan, Béla Fleck, Mark O’Connor, Michael Daves, and Brad Mehldau. He has written a mandolin concerto, and is as at home playing classical music as he is improvising in bluegrass or jazz.

We caught up by phone with Thile to talk with him about music and inspiration.

## HOW INSPIRATION WORKS

The quality of your art is directly proportional to how hard you work at it. I don’t subscribe to the

lightning bolt...the kind of “waiting for lightning to strike” thing. When lightning does strike it is a wonderful, wonderful experience, but I would also

say lightning strikes lightning rods a hell of a lot more often than it just strikes random things. Musicians need to be erecting lightning rods. Basically, working on your craft is erecting a lightning rod. You give inspiration a lot more windows to climb through if you're working. That's how I approach it. When my days are full of music, I am a happier musician.

## EARLIEST MUSICAL MEMORIES

My earliest memories are of music. I can remember hearing Stan Getz and [Antonio Carlos] Jobim and the Gilbertos playing "The Girl from Ipanema." I can remember listening to that in my parents' house and not being able to understand the English any better than the Portuguese.

And then hearing Earl Scruggs play "Sally Ann," his weird version of "Sally Ann" that's not actually like the real version of "Sally Ann" but, like, unbelievable.... Listening to NPR and even the NPR theme, loving that, and loving hearing Peter Ostroushko play the mandolin on *Prairie Home Companion*...my parents eventually playing the Beatles' *Rubber Soul* in the house, and then my parents starting to take me to this pizza place where a little bluegrass band would play every Saturday night.

They were all such transcendent moments for me. Before I would know it, it would just take me—an insanely energetic kid—and it would arrest me. It would disarm all of my senses or engage all of my senses. To me, sometimes the greatest art, I feel like it's almost this disarming thing and all of a sudden your defenses are down and alien perspectives are washing over you. You could think of it as infecting you, or you could think of it as nourishing you. I feel like with great music, I always had the easiest time sort of surrendering my reservations and the weapons I use against life.

## A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO GENRE

[My music has] a bluegrass tone of voice, but what's being said is a little bit different. I kind of feel that, at the end of the day, a genre is about as important as the tone of someone's speaking voice. And how important is that really? I don't think it's that important; I think [what's important] is what they are saying.

We will all have the same material laid out in

# BRAD MEHLDAU ON INSPIRATION

When jazz pianist/composer Brad Mehldau was interviewed by the NEA back in April 2013—while he was on tour with Chris Thile—he commented on his inspiration for his work, and what musicians and composers influenced his music. The rest of Mehldau's interview can be found on the *Art Works Blog* at [arts.gov](http://arts.gov).

Brahms seems to be one that I myself notice at least—I always see his music peeking out in what I write. It's what one of his biographers described as "smiling through tears." I like a bleeding heart that holds itself in check a bit—that kind of German Romanticism, not all in your face.

I started out as a kid playing classical piano and listening to rock. When I first heard jazz when I was 11 or so, it seemed to have something from both of those types of music, but something even more—a deep feeling of dance rhythm and the blues, and also the kind of virtuoso display that I associated with classical piano players that I admired.

[My compositions] come from inside the music—the music generates its own ideas, the mere wonderful fact of 12 tones and all their possibilities. I'm sure it's affected by my life experiences, but it is never a specific moment for me. I suspect it's a more cumulative kind of thing of everything I've experienced up until the very moment I'm writing a given tune.



Thile on break in his performance with Mehl dau.

PHOTO BY DYLAN SINGELTON

front of us, and it's how we choose to assemble it. And that's what I am interested in—how different individuals or collections of individuals assemble the material that is available to all of us. And I am less concerned about the veneer, which is where I think genre is concerned.

I am not saying that that is unimportant. It's a choice that Punch Brothers made to essentially play bluegrass instruments. I kind of feel like the boys and I chose our instruments at so young an age [that] it was almost like your speaking voice developing. So it's happenstance that we all found bluegrass, that we were all raised sort of on bluegrass. At a certain point, you realize that the things you love the most about bluegrass, about a given genre, have nothing to do with that music existing in that genre.

When I was 18, I would go to Tower Records with this plan—I am going to buy four records: one in the folk world, one in the classical world, one in the pop world, one in the jazz world. That was kind of how I looked at music at that point. I would go home and listen and learn the stuff and practice and try and learn what people from what I considered to be these kinds of separate disciplines would do. And when I heard great music from each, I was just blown away. Then I would try to find more music like that within that genre. I was establishing my own musical aesthetic.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATION

Diversifying is as important to a musician as it is to a portfolio. Brad [Mehldau] was one of those musicians that helped me to see beyond thinking in terms of what a great jazz song this is, or what a great pop song this is.

What I love is playing with someone like Brad or people like my buddy Michael Daves in this rip-roaring, honky bluegrass deal. The thing with Michael, for instance, it's very improvisational, so the stuff that Brad and I have gotten into (on the rare occasions we've gotten to play together) has helped me get to some crazy, cool new places with Michael. And the reckless, devil-may-care attitude that Michael has—he just rears back and lets it fly—has helped Punch Brothers become more visceral. Getting to make music with Yo-Yo Ma—he's so interested in his collaborators' point-of-view as human beings, where they are coming from as humans, as he is with any aspect of music making, and I found that incredibly inspiring. That can give the music depth I don't think you could get any other way. And the clarity of Edgar Myers' musical thought has impacted every collaboration I have ever had, and my whole life as well. ▲





Self Portrait, 2003. PHOTO © MURIEL HASBUN

# Muriel Hasbun

## GETTING TO KNOW ONESELF

Interview by Rebecca Gross

Photography has the ability to freeze a fleeting moment, visually fixing a particular place and time in a single, immutable frame. Photographer Muriel Hasbun, on the other hand, has managed to expand her art form in such a way that her pieces move beyond mere moments, instead encapsulating entire family histories, diasporas, and cultural movements. The chair of photography at the Corcoran College of Art and Design, Hasbun uses her work to explore her family's unusual lineage and the tensions of her native El Salvador, often mixing historic photographs with multiple exposures to evoke the many layers of her personal story. Hasbun, a former Fulbright Scholar whose work has been exhibited around the world, recently spoke in her studio about how inspiration figures into her career.

### Working Toward That “Aha!” Moment

Inspiration is something that is overrated in some ways. The whole idea that the artist all of a sudden has this amazing “Aha!” moment is obviously part of the process, but it's not the way that work actually happens necessarily. I think that bodies of work, or some sort of insight, usually come

because you've been toiling away for a long time, and consistently. It's a process of figuring out what your sources are, figuring out what it is that you're trying to say—a lot of play and a lot of work. Then somehow these things come together, and one moment you have this incredible insight into what you're doing.

I work over time. Nothing comes quickly. It seems that my process is one where I'm collecting



these different little hints that I get as I progress. Something could be brewing for a while, and so I jot it down in my journal or keep things written down and maybe I collect things in a folder or just continue thinking and all of a sudden, there's this moment of, "Oh wow, look at that." There's a consistency here or there's a thread that can pull these things together.

It's a combination of being open, being alert to those particular things that you're doing and that you're paying attention to, how it is that you're making things, and then connecting them. In that connection, something that you never imagined comes about. That's the wonder of that particular creative moment.... When something becomes apparent to you that it actually makes sense, then that's it. That's the creative moment. It is such a relief. You live for those moments. But you realize that the only way

that they can happen is if you're working and thinking and you're centered and always aware.

## The Search for Subjects That Inspire

Finding the subject of what the artwork will be is perhaps the hardest thing for an artist to figure out. It really entails getting to know oneself. In my own practice, it all began [with] trying to figure out how to say it, what visual language to use, and then what to say. I started as a documentary photographer, photographing in El Salvador during the civil war.... I found myself exploring my place through [photography.]

I came back to the U.S. to get a master's degree in fine arts, and photography became the way that I started to think about how I could construct the place where I could live in. It became a dialogue between over there and here as well as a past and present, and also these very disparate elements that make up who I am. My background is so hybrid: I come from this family of immigrants to El Salvador, Palestinian Christian on my father's side and Jewish French Polish on my mother's side. All of that came to a head while I was in the U.S.: all of a sudden I was seen as Latina because I came from El Salvador. But my background was so complex that it wasn't so simple.

So identity really became my subject.... There was this whole issue of who am I to different people, and how is it that I can reconcile what it means to be Jewish and Arab and Latina and having grown up in El Salvador and being trilingual. My work became the place where I started to experiment and answer those questions. That's how [my photographic series] *Saints and Shadows* (*Santos y Sombras*) came about. It was really a process of finding out who I am and learning about my family and learning about my family's different exiles and different immigration and genocide stories.... That became the territory of my investigation. It's identity and memory and how history gets constructed and how people's definitions of who they are become made through life. That's what gave me this path and this incredibly rich territory to explore. I'm still investigating, and photography was a great tool to do that.

## Finding New Inspiration in Familiar Territory

There are different parts of a puzzle that are being answered as I go along. When I started doing *Saints*

and *Shadows*, it was kind of a coming-of-age moment where it seemed really important and necessary for my definition as a person to actually do this, to actually figure out what this was about. So it was very urgent in some ways. Doing that work, which took basically a decade, I realized that it was like putting a puzzle together. So the inspiration in some ways is always there because the puzzle's never quite resolved, or there are other aspects of it that become apparent because I'm perhaps more ready to deal with them.

## Who Do You Hope to Inspire with Your Work?

Being in Washington, DC, and being part of this greater Central-American community, I do find that there's a certain responsibility that we have. There are two million Salvadorans in the U.S.; there are about 500,000 Salvadorans in Washington. I think the inspiration might be to

give people the opportunity for some way of expressing who they are, or a voice to express who they are or who they want to be.

I try to...find ways of including other people who might not come into a museum, or who might not usually feel like they have something to say or have not been given the opportunity to have something to say. I figured that out with a piece that I did at the Art Museum of the Americas that was called *Documented: The Community Blackboard*. I had one room where I invited people to come and post their photographs and write whatever it was that they wanted to write in response to an audio piece that I had reflecting on my own story of migration. I was bringing the photographs that I had collected in El Salvador to those walls, so it was a way to have dialogue between what happened over there and what was happening here. ▲



**ABOVE** | ¿Sólo una sombra?/ Only a Shadow? (Ester's Poems), 1994 and 2004, part of Muriel Hasbun's *Saints and Shadows* series.

**OPPOSITE** | ¿Sólo una sombra?/ Only a Shadow? (Faiga), 1994, part of Muriel Hasbun's *Saints and Shadows* series.

PHOTOS © MURIEL HASBUN



**SEPTIME WEBRE**

***TRIGGER POINTS FOR***  
**INSPIRATION**

**Interview by Paulette Beete**

**ABOVE** | Septime Webre. PHOTO BY STEVE VACCARIELLO

**RIGHT** | Maki Onuki and Jared Nelson in Septime Webre's production of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. PHOTO BY BRIANNE BLAND



According to an interview in a local Washington, DC, weekly, at ten years old Septime Webre was already directing his siblings (he's one of nine) and the neighborhood kids in his own plays, including his initial offering, *The Case of the Recurring Ennui*. Today, as artistic director of the Washington Ballet, Webre's imagination is no less vivid or expansive. Not only has he reinvigorated the holiday standard *The Nutcracker* by setting it in the nation's capital, but he's also adapted several literary classics into ballets, including *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Great Gatsby*. As he tells us in his own words below, great literature is just one of his many flashpoints for inspiration, along with contemporary art, yoga, and the beach.

## How Inspiration Works as an Artistic Director/Choreographer

Inspiration, for me, is related to free association. When something uplifts me and sparks a new idea about an unrelated topic, that's inspiration. For example last year's Ai Weiwei exhibit at the Hirshhorn [Museum and Sculpture Garden], which I found exceedingly moving on aesthetic terms. But also, understanding a bit about his personal story sparked some new ideas in me about how to approach a choreographic project.... The project's unrelated to Ai Weiwei's work, but just something about the exhibit opened up my way of thinking about something I was approaching. In a way, it helped me question the paradigm of how I was working.

Inspiration [when planning a season] is about what repertoire will dance. And that means seeing a lot of work and developing a point of view about what makes sense for our company and what kind of aesthetic we'll be presenting, and how [in] one given program you can't accomplish everything that you are. But over the course of a season, there should be a journey, which encompasses a bit of everything that you value.

[In regards to] developing a repertoire, the inspirations are much like those same things that inspire me as a choreographer—the world around me, and what the world's about, and how we want to be developing work that is relevant to the world that we live in.

I'm looking for works that will inspire audiences.... There's

a certain amount of empathy that has to be present, and conjecture.... I have dancers who have been with me for 14 years, who started with me when they were 18, 19, or 20 years old. So that's a whole career together. I'm inspired by their growth, the ways they surprise me onstage. When I see them excel onstage, it opens my eyes to the possibility of other repertoire that they could tackle for future seasons.

I'm also inspired by best practices in other institutions. It's kind of fun for me to see what's happening in other fields, you know, in terms of institution building, and of how the art is represented in visual arts, in theater, in music.... We all describe our work in different ways. You know, visual arts is a very intellectual approach to presenting the work to the public. Each theater company has a dramaturge who's doing nothing but thinking about the work and talking about it and writing about it.

## Artistic Triggers

I've identified about five trigger points. Things I've read, which always influence what I'm doing. And as a matter of fact, in recent years, I've made a number of adaptations of books I've read, which have inspired me. Most recently, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, and before that, *The Great Gatsby*.... Just oddball books find their ways into the work.

Contemporary visual arts are definitely a trigger point. I've always found a deep connection with artists working in the visual arts today.

And a third is music. I'm a Cuban American, and so we Cubans hear this music happening all around. And it's been music all around me since I was born.

A fourth is yoga. In the last five years or so, I've become very committed to practicing Ashtanga yoga, which is a very physical, I would say kick-ass, kind of yoga. And the meditation in it is arrived at through intense physical commitment. I relate to it because that's how a ballet dancer needs to approach their ballet training.... The idea is a kind of physical meditation. And over time, that has created a space for new ideas to pop up out of the blue. When I'm trying to tie myself up into a pretzel.

And the fifth is the beach. I'm from a beach family, and I grew up in the Bahamas until I was 12. [The beach] is a place where I often combine just about all of those things I just described. You know, ideally, the best ideas should come when I'm reading a book,

listening to music, in a yoga pose on the beach... while building a conceptual sculpture.

## The Effect of Collaboration on Inspiration

In the case of a good collaboration, there is a situation where the sum is greater than the individual parts. And the act of collaboration is, to some degree, a selfless act. You are ceding to another part of the decision-making process that you would ordinarily keep for yourself. So when I'm collaborating with a dancer on a new role, I'm actually letting them make choreographic decisions in the process. When I collaborate with a composer, I'm letting them make some decisions on how characters will be determined, how the atmosphere of a particular scene or portion will be delivered. You're giving up a certain amount of authority, and in return, you get a lot of new ideas. That's exciting and inspiring to me, certainly.

## Personal Inspirations

I think [visual] artists inspire me more than just about anyone in the world. In particular, Cy Twombly, a modernist. Modernist artists provided my early window into aesthetic ideas. When I was in the Bahamas, I was able to look at my parents' art books, those exhilarating moments of seeing the work of Cy Twombly and Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, and also Pablo Picasso, and many others. Those modern artists just exhilarated me. And later, as a young adult, I started to investigate the work of contemporary visual artists, and so many are my heroes. I'm also really thrilled by what I read. Certainly, the great literature like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, but I also love the storytelling skills of John Irving and Tom Wolfe's understanding of popular culture. I love the work of so many choreographers, but I'm especially inspired by the works of Balanchine and Jerome Robbins and Twyla Tharp, Paul Taylor and Mark Morris, Jiri Kylian, and William Forsythe. I love Johann Sebastian Bach, Philip Glass, and Celia Cruz, and Miles Davis, above all.

Inspirations are to be found in the world around you. You need to be mindful about how you walk in the world, how you live in the world. And if you have your eyes open wide enough, you can find inspiration in just about anything. ▲

# TOD LIPPY PROVIDING A CONTEXT FOR ART

INTERVIEW BY REBECCA GROSS

To call *Esopus* a magazine is a bit of a misnomer. Showcasing the broadest possible spectrum of creative endeavors, the lush, encyclopedia-thick volume is an exercise in printed ingenuity, filled with inserts, pull-outs, various types of papers and inks, a CD with original tracks, and occasionally, a do-it-yourself project. As Editor and Executive Director Tod Lippy said, “In the end, it’s less a magazine and more of an exhibition; it just happens to be on paper and in a magazine format.” Published twice a year since 2003, *Esopus* (pronounced, Lippy said, like “a bar of soapus”) is free from advertisements, critiques, or reviews, ideally offering a neutral, non-commercial avenue for contemporary artists to engage with the public. Lippy, who runs a one-man show as *Esopus*’s sole designer, editor, and manager, recently spoke with us by phone about the role inspiration plays in the magazine’s development.

## THE INSPIRING POWER OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION

I’m inspired by work that provokes me, surprises me, excites me, that seems to do something in a new

way or in a different way that deepens my experience of whatever the subject matter of the piece is. I think the only reason I do anything is because I am inspired by other kinds of creative expression, and other approaches to creative expression. It’s an absolute essential part of my process to be exposed to things that are inspiring for whatever reason.

A great piece of contemporary art to me is just about as inspiring as it gets. I think art has a wonderful way to make us question our role in the world, our position in society, our beliefs. I wanted to be able to provide a context in a form for contemporary artists to bring that work to a broader audience. I also did a master’s [degree] in film, and I love particular European films and



Tod Lippy, editor of *Esopus*. PHOTO BY CHRIS RAMIREZ

independent films that aren't that well-distributed in the U.S. but which have had huge influences on me as a person. Fiction, poetry, basically any kind of human expression inspires me—anything that takes one person's perspective on life and conveys it to other people. The more complex, the more nuanced the better as far as I'm concerned. It's hard for me not to be inspired by any kind of creative expression.

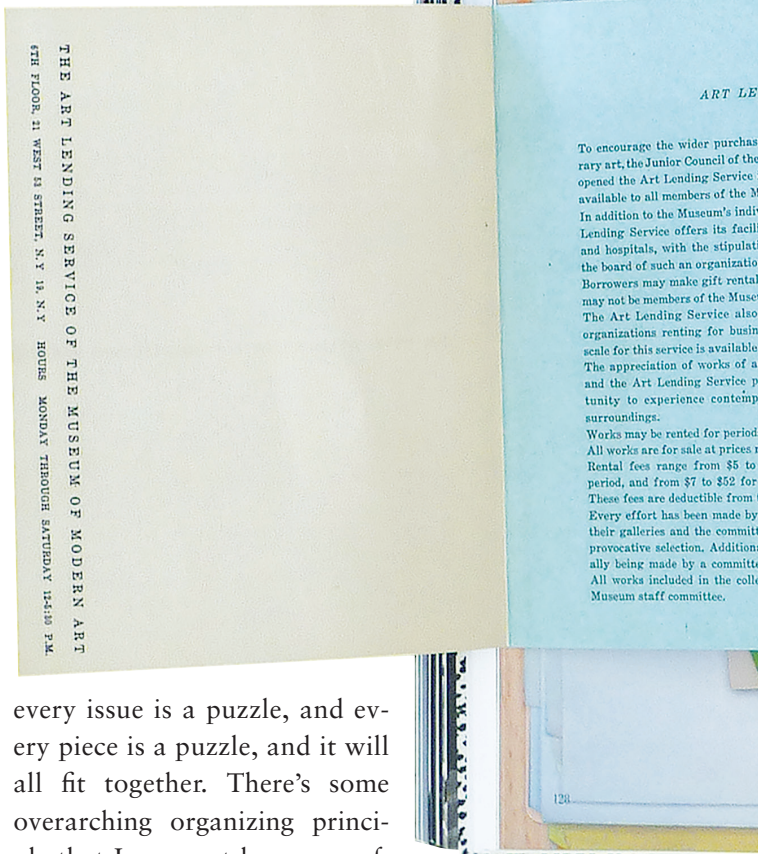
There's nothing that inspires me more than archival material. I just find it fascinating. I find it incredibly illuminating. I find it deeply personal. You go to MoMA [Museum of Modern Art in New York City], whom we do a series with, and you'll look at letters, notes written from curators to artists, artists to curators, or whoever. You get a sense of people behind these totemic artworks or exhibitions, and how everybody had made such enormous efforts to make these things happen. That's the way with all archives for me. I find them to be incredible documents of human expression, and the effort behind any kind of creative enterprise.

## BRINGING ESOPUS TO FRUITION

I set the parameters for myself as a creative person. I want to do something that's commercial free, I want to do something that has no commercial influence whatsoever informing it. I want to do something that reaches a wide swath of people, and I want to do something with really unusual, interesting, well-known, and also emerging contributors who have something interesting to say about this or that. Inspiration is a great way to start [working on an issue]. What did I see in the past three or four months that really inspired me? It can be anything—a show at a gallery or at a museum or something on television or a film or a piece of writing. But it's something that got me excited about art and creativity. Let's say I happen to snag that person to do something for the issue. Then the next question is what else will be nice in the same context or in the same frame as that particular piece? That process continues until I have 12 or 13 or 15 contributions. The idea is to celebrate the individuality of each of these pieces, but also treat them in a way and organize them in a manner that makes them feel like they're singing together, even though they're singing different songs. There's a commonality, not in approach necessarily but in

effect, so that it doesn't feel like a cacophony. My process is about trying to make that happen, trying to guide that in a very gentle, mostly invisible way as designer and maybe as a curator.

I think these pieces [for an issue] are so strong that for the most part, they stand on their own. I don't think [my editorial decisions are] that special. I think it's just that you listen carefully; look and listen and think, "What is this piece saying? How does it want to appear in the magazine? What makes the most sense for it?" Maybe it's a vaguely mystical thing, but it is something that I find really fun, challenging, and kind of daunting sometimes. I feel like



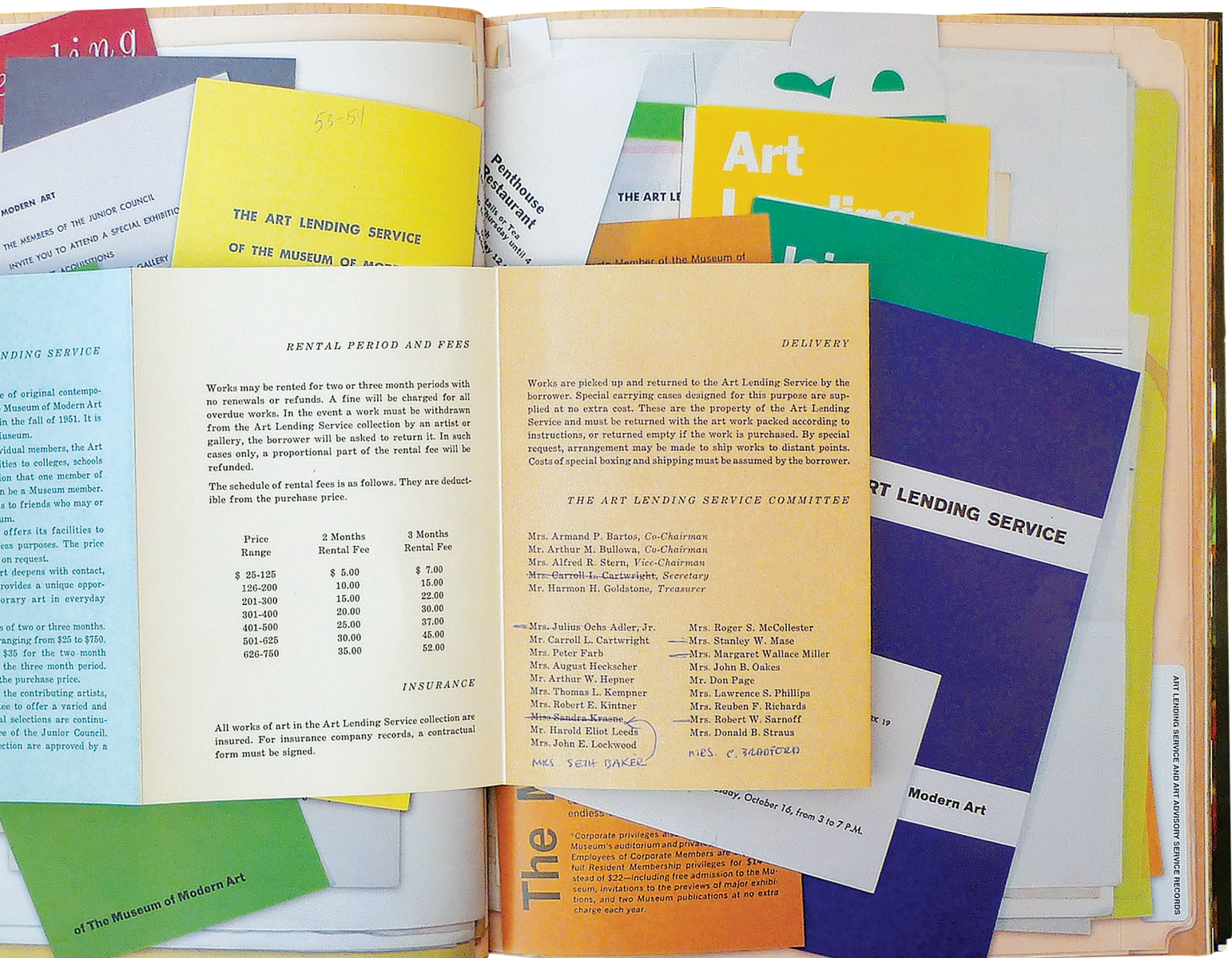
every issue is a puzzle, and every piece is a puzzle, and it will all fit together. There's some overarching organizing principle that I may not be aware of, but it will make itself known over the course of putting together the issue. I have six months between issues, so I have a lot of time to live with these materials and think about them in a way that doesn't involve me quickly trying to impose something visually on them that wouldn't be there normally, or that would fight



with them in some way. You spend a lot of time with an artwork or a song or anything else, and it starts to reveal itself to you.

If I have a thing in front of me—it could be somebody’s artwork or it could be somebody’s piece of music or a set of journals—then suddenly I have a way in, even if it’s a mockup of the issue that I’m

working on. If I can look at it, if I can flip through it, if I can touch it, if I can manipulate it, I’m much more inspired and I feel like I have a much better handle on what to do with it than I would if I were just thinking purely out of thin air. I’m much more of a tactile person, so anything that requires a tactile response or is a material thing is very inspiring to me. ▲



RENTAL PERIOD AND FEES

Works may be rented for two or three month periods with no renewals or refunds. A fine will be charged for all overdue works. In the event a work must be withdrawn from the Art Lending Service collection by an artist or gallery, the borrower will be asked to return it. In such cases only, a proportional part of the rental fee will be refunded.

The schedule of rental fees is as follows. They are deductible from the purchase price.

Price Range	2 Months Rental Fee	3 Months Rental Fee
\$ 25-125	\$ 5.00	\$ 7.00
126-200	10.00	15.00
201-300	15.00	22.00
301-400	20.00	30.00
401-500	25.00	37.00
501-625	30.00	45.00
626-750	35.00	52.00

INSURANCE

All works of art in the Art Lending Service collection are insured. For insurance company records, a contractual form must be signed.

DELIVERY

Works are picked up and returned to the Art Lending Service by the borrower. Special carrying cases designed for this purpose are supplied at no extra cost. These are the property of the Art Lending Service and must be returned with the art work packed according to instructions, or returned empty if the work is purchased. By special request, arrangement may be made to ship works to distant points. Costs of special boxing and shipping must be assumed by the borrower.

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“Rent to Own,” which features documents from the Museum of Modern Art Archives related to the museum’s art lending program, from *Esopus 17*. PHOTO BY TOD LIPPY



Jeanne Gang. PHOTO © STUDIO GANG ARCHITECTS

# Jeanne Gang

# Urban Inspiration

INTERVIEW BY JEN HUGHES

In a 2011 interview with architect Jeanne Gang, the *New York Times* praised the newly minted MacArthur Fellow's "habit of coaxing lyricism out of rigor in many of her designs." It is this ability to balance beauty with utility that has made Studio Gang Architects, which Gang founded in 1997, one of the most exciting architectural firms in the country. Based in Chicago, Studio Gang has helped reshape the city with projects such as the 82-story, ripple-skinned Aqua Tower, a nature boardwalk at the Lincoln Park Zoo, and a pair of boathouses along the Chicago River, the latest in a series of steps to transform the neglected riverfront into a recreational area. During a recent phone conversation, Gang spoke about her creative process and shared the inspiration behind several of her projects.

## Seeking Inspiration

One way I get started [on a project] is usually by creating a reading list of research around a topic that we might be dealing with. That reading list is added to by people that are participating in the project, including the client. That reading list

builds up and it is a thing that creates a common baseline knowledge about the subject matter. So many times, inspiration comes from just reading about a subject and where the mind starts to take you. It starts getting more and more exciting the more that you build up that knowledge base.

The other kind of inspiration comes when you

are not really trying, and you are just experiencing the city or something in nature; it is from direct observation of the world around you. A lot of times, for me, it is the natural world or a phenomena that I come into contact with—whether it is a storm or some kind of biological occurrence or animal or nature or something in a museum—those kind of things. Those terrestrial things are oftentimes very important and interesting to me.

Definitely, there are people that inspire me. Many times it is in these allied, but different professions or fields when I can suddenly make connections and synthesize information about my own knowledge or what we are doing at the studio with something that might be happening in the sciences or in urban planning or even in policy. Those are where the exciting synapses happen with me. And making sure that you have opportunities to be exposed to those different things. I love going to listen to architects, but I especially like to go outside the field and see what is going on, especially in the arts and in science.

## Inspiration for Designing the Writers Theatre Building

With Writers Theatre [in Glencoe, Illinois], the inspiration came from delving deeper into how theater could positively impact street life, and making connections between a specific place and something from theater's past. Inspiration came from doing a lot of research and going to a lot of performances, which is a nice benefit about doing a theater project.

I was really inspired by the art itself, the productions that the Writers Theatre creates, and the way that they do it, which really gives a strong emphasis to the written word. The way that they craft their performances was, I thought, aligned with or parallel to the way that we create architecture and focus on the essence of the place, material, and environment as our medium to express. It's relevant that theater historically was used to reflect society, create community, and enliven public space, particularly street theaters in medieval times.



The architectural design of Writers Theatre in Glencoe, Illinois, by Studio Gang Architects.  
PHOTO © STUDIO GANG ARCHITECTS



Chicago's Aqua Tower, designed by Studio Gang Architects.  
PHOTO BY STEVE HALL © HEDRICH BLESSING

Glencoe was a place that was once a forest and then deforested and then [the forest] started growing back again. It had this need for a more lively downtown. We started putting together some of those dots and decided on the use of wood technology, inspired by the early frame type buildings of the Tudor era. So we were saying let's take some of those past ingredients and bring them up to the 21st century and see what we can produce. It was not in any way trying to aesthetically copy anything in the past, but it was just finding these kind of touch points.

We ended up designing a space that actually gives Glencoe almost an impromptu theater space in the lobby, in addition to a thrust stage for 250 people and a 99-seat flexible black box stage. This lobby doubles as a performance space really much more connected to the street. It also gives multiple vantage points through this almost public gallery walk on the second level, where we are using wood construction, but a 21st-century version of wood construction, putting this piece of the design as a visible icon for the theater.

## Inspiring Others to Live in a More Compact City

I think the most important thing has been to make architecture that is engaging to the city, to make the city a compelling place so that people want to be living in a more compact city. For example, something like the Aqua Tower was really intended to make dwelling in the city something that does not feel like you are losing qualities of your lifestyle. We know we have to move towards a more compact and higher quality of living instead of sprawling way, way, way out—that uses so many more resources. In this context, we had in the back of our mind how

can we make [Aqua Tower] be a place that people really want to be part of and live in. The terraces are something that give you your own outdoor space, even if you are in a high-rise. The amenities and the architecture are working together to make the building be something that can draw people in, from empty nesters from the suburbs to students who want to live downtown, to live in a city and be close to the cultural amenities, to be close to work, and to reduce reliance on automobiles. ▲



Marc Bamuthi Joseph performing his work *red, black & GREEN: a blues*. PHOTO BY BETHANIE HINES

# Marc Bamuthi Joseph

# Follow Your Ghosts

INTERVIEW BY PAULETTE BEETE

Marc Bamuthi Joseph's response when asked to describe the work he does as an artist? "Man, I've been trying to figure that out for the last 15 years!" With works like *red, black & GREEN: a blues* and *the breaks/s* to his credit, you might describe Joseph's art practice as equal parts performance poetry, dance theater, and social activism. Or you could borrow the native New Yorker's own words and call him a "cross-disciplinary artist based in verse." A three-time San Francisco Poetry Grand Slam Champion, Joseph is not only in the business of making his own work, however. As the current director of performing arts for San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, he's also in the business of creating the opportunity and environment for other artists to make their own work. In Joseph's own words, here are his thoughts on the process and practice of inspiration.



**ABOVE** | Joseph (background) with, from left to right, Theaster Gates, Traci Tolmaire, and Tommy Shephard. PHOTO BY BETHANIE HINES  
**OPPOSITE** | Marc Bamuthi Joseph performing his work *red, black & GREEN: a blues*. PHOTO BY BETHANIE HINES

## An Environment for Inspiration

I personally find inspiration in life's 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows. I find it in civic unrest. I find it in the centricity of being able to touch the cosmos at sunrise. I would say that creating an environment for inspiration—and maybe I speak most principally in my experience as a classroom teacher—but I think that composing or constructing an environment for inspiration is about latitude, democracy, and a live dynamic relationship to inquiry and information. The feeling [of inspiration] often gets expressed when someone says, “I wish I could do that.” Well, maybe even better: “I can do that.” So there has to be access. I think constructing an environment that inspires is about eliminating that feeling of impossibility and creating access to the possibility of touch and change.

There are either people or events or ghosts that wake me up at night or keep me from falling asleep. Those are the [moments of inspiration] that I follow. And this isn't like in a troubled way. It's

less than trouble—it's more than preoccupation. It's a mild and consistent haunting. Yeah, I follow the ghosts. They tell me what to do.

## The Inspiration Quotient

I try to program artistically. It's not just artistic direction. It's not just what I want to see but the apex of collaboration, of access, of willful participation, of active community. These are the places where I try to program from, the places where I try to teach from, and the places where I perform from. All of these are embedded inside of maybe a more ritualistic approach to how art transforms the body politic.

I think that the key is to engage collaborators who inspire you so that there's kind of an exponential momentum. There's this exponential inspiration quotient, a different kind of IQ, if you will, that is present throughout the process. And so if you hire technicians to follow through on an initial point of inspiration, I don't think it's as promising or as fertile as if you hire a bunch of folks that you're

inspired by who are also technically sound, but will complicate the initial kind of inspiration by bringing in their own points to the experience.

If you're doing it right, it's all inspired work. I'm not trying to undermine the level of rigor that it takes to bring an artistic project or any project to fruition. But I think, in the arts in particular, if you're leading with production and not with a process born of inspiration, then all it is is a labor, and that's not the kind of art I want to be involved in.

## My Inspirations

Octavia Butler in between the pages. Serena Williams on the tennis court. My family, my wife, and my two kids in the home. Malcolm X and Harriet Tubman historically. Bill T. Jones intellectually. All animators everywhere, particularly the creators of the Marvel Universe and the folks at Pixar. So would I say Magneto and Malcolm X are on the same plane? No, but they inspire me in different ways. Theaster Gates, Brett Cook, Wangari Maathai, Paulo Freire. There's really no shortage.

## The Inspiration Behind *red, black & GREEN: a blues*

The first part of inspiration was the planet, was the Earth—and maybe the discrepancy between how the stewardship of the planet has been codified in more institutional environments and movements, and how stewardship of the planet is either neglected by or under-documented in under-resourced neighborhoods, particularly black and brown under-resourced neighborhoods. So in that sense, it was less of a “rising sun,” or a newfound-love kind of inspiration. That was more scientific, almost, where there was—for lack of a better word—a problem, and [I] kind of walked around it in an effort to see how I might contribute to its resolution.

But as the process deepened and grew more emotional the point of inspiration became less about a problem and more about joy, and love being among the more complicated joys, the love that I found as I traveled around the country producing festivals wherein the centerpiece of the festivals was the question, “What sustains life in your community?”



## Finding a Way to Keep Going

Part of the artist's temperament is that inspiration is possible in all things. [There is a] very human tension to abandon a path toward change or growth when it becomes available, maybe because of the way that it's packaged. Would I rather watch Rachel Maddow than write an opera? Sometimes. If it's ten o'clock at night and the kids have gone to sleep...I want to both engage and tune out. [Sometimes] I succumb to my humanness and would rather absorb than generate. And the thing that I'm surprised by is that I continue to overcome. Artists, in general, we overcome lethargy. There's always something there to dig at.

It's the volume of inspiration that's the most surprising thing, the desire to keep going, to keep making.... Inspiration is a tool like blood, like breath. As removed as we are from the kind of auto action of respiration, there's a way that we can be passive in our relationship to respiration, and there's a way that we can have a more active relationship with our respiration. And the inspiration, I feel, is the same way that we can have an active relationship with our inspiration to be healthier, more generative individuals. So don't sleep through inspiration. ▲



Artist Milisa Valliere at work. PHOTO COURTESY OF MILISA VALLIERE



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As part of our online content for this issue, which you can find by scanning the QR code or visiting [arts.gov](https://arts.gov), we continue to look at inspiration by talking with jazz cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum, looking at the work of artist Milisa Valliere, and more.

Don't forget to check out our *Art Works Blog* ([arts.gov/art-works](https://arts.gov/art-works)) for daily stories on the arts in the country, and join us on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/NationalEndowmentfortheArts](https://www.facebook.com/NationalEndowmentfortheArts)) Twitter (@NEAArts) YouTube ([www.youtube.com/NEAArts](https://www.youtube.com/NEAArts))