

Chicago Antisocial

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Top: the “gargoyles,” Evan Scott-Rubin and Lola Rose Thompson’s “I Believe.” Bottom: SAIC student Andres Laracuate, Brendan Missett’s “Nirvana,” the chanting.

dressed in turbans and flowy white garments gently placed the paraphernalia of new age healing—crystals, gems, stones, pyramids, obelisks, cabochons—on the naked body of a man with a shaved head and comically bushy eyebrows who was lying faceup on a bed on the floor. There was no explaining, no addressing the audience, just a sort of quiet surgery. I got the feeling the point of the exercise was to expose the sadistic and ridiculous sides of healing—eventually they were putting leaves and orange slices on the poor guy.

My favorite piece was Brendan Missett’s “Nirvana,” which took place in a small alcove behind a beaded curtain lined with ornate fabrics and wood-patterned contact paper. Squishy cushions and pillows on the floor gave the illusion of invitation, but once I stepped inside I noticed Missett in the corner covered in blankets and scarves and shawls. He wore mirrored aviator shades on top of it all, and a severe-looking penknife was stuck in the wall next to his head. He remained crouched there, motionless except to fiddle with a boom box once in a while or to pass viewers a joint.

Lit by strobe and black light, “Nirvana” included a taxidermied cat sleeping next to a box bearing a pentagram; a lacy white parasol full of white fake roses hanging from the ceiling; a bundle of turd-size cutoff dreadlocks next to an intoxicating amount of burning nag champa; a small TV tuned fuzzily to a Korean channel, where stern-looking men in stiff suits and side-swept hair delivered what I assume was the news; a poster of an enormous neon red globe reading LOOK AT GEIGER; a book on Zoroastrianism; dream-catchers galore; a macrame monstrosity holding a book called *Quotations From Chairman Mao*. Sitting in that room I went from zero to fucked in about five minutes, and it wasn’t just from the weed.

At the end of the night Scott-Rubin and Thompson led the audience in a group exercise for which Scott-Rubin changed into an Elvis pompadour wig and jumpsuit. “You are one!” she shouted. “Raise up your arms, straighten out your elbows! Everyone!” She instructed us to chant one word—*haar*, which she said was Sanskrit for “creative energy”—in unison while clapping our hands above our heads. “This is your chance! Don’t be tired! You are light! You are grace! Haar! Haar! Haar!”

I closed my eyes and clapped my hands until my arms felt like dead branches being blown around by the wind. For those few ecstatic minutes I felt completely removed from myself, in unmediated bliss. The height of successful performance art, says Laracuate, is its shared consciousness. “Then it goes away and lives on in the imagination.”

It Doesn’t Have to Involve Food

When performance art is good, it can be transcendent.

By Liz Armstrong

Performance art gets a bad rap—too many naked men smearing meat on their bodies and denouncing the Man, too many cake-spraying women straddling fish. Too often it’s like improv comedy, only not funny—a messy and embarrassing waste of time. But when it’s good, the ridiculous leads to the sublime, transforming a space, generating genuine emotions.

Last Saturday’s performance art extravaganza was about 80/20 in favor of the good stuff. River West’s regrettably named Lazerhappy Studios (kids: due to rampant overuse, from now on *laser*, *lazer*, *glass*, *crystal*, *wolf*, and *cake* are totally off-limits for naming spaces or bands) was hosting All Tomorrow’s Parties, a smorgasbord of 14 acts (many performed simultaneously) in about two hours curated by School of the Art Institute student Andres Laracuate, who says “performance art is unique because it inhabits entertainment space . . . but it exists in a real space with real people. It can get and hold attention, with actual repercussions.”

The room was small and stuffy, its walls and windows lined with black trash bags. When I walked in four human gargoyles crustily painted chalk white were slowly lifting the skirts of their 80s prom dresses, displaying lacy, ruffly skivvies, shaking their thighs like they were having seizures.

Laracuate said he selected pieces that had a mystical, ritualistic, magical vibe to them. That and a bit of shock value. What sticks with him from his studies at SAIC is “kind of like extreme,” he says, like Chris Burden shooting himself in the arm, or “70s performance art where people are running around naked pulling scrolls out of their vaginas.”

The last time Laracuate performed was one weekend earlier at Lazerhappy, in a piece called “Death 2006.” He lay on a bed in the middle of the room and fellow student and collaborator Zoe Weisman injected tranquilizers into his hip. Their friend Matt Ginsberg played mandolin until Laracuate conked out. Adrian Tone and Gerard Kilgallon, directors of Lazerhappy, carried the bed to the back of the room

and for the two hours he was under, according to Laracuate, people were giving him kisses, telling him stories, stroking his forehead, grabbing his testicles, jumping on top of him, and putting makeup on his face. “It really creeped everyone out,” he says.

For his performance at All Tomorrow’s Parties, Laracuate projected a Web page onto a blank wall and deleted his MySpace profile in front of an honestly gasping audience. I guess to a 23-year-old art student that’s like cutting off a limb. Laracuate thought he had truly touched on something: “It was part liberation, part sacrifice. People really got to live vicariously.”

I couldn’t actually see much of what went on at this show. It was so packed inside the main room that I couldn’t move without stepping on a body part. Going anywhere was like that puzzle where you slide one tile at a time around a square to form a picture. If you weren’t in the right spot at the right time, too bad, you missed it.

But hearing accounts of what I couldn’t see—like Dan Keller and Nik Kosmas oiling up their bodies and lifting weights in a piece

called “Black Touch” and Tone and Kilgallon dressed in jumpsuits, using a buzz saw to halve a copy of Barry Schwabsky’s very thick book *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting*—gave the whole event a spazzy energy. So many things were happening you couldn’t even see them all—that’s unusual for a party.

Sometimes it was hard to tell who was performing and who was just a pretentious asshole in the audience. One art student dropped a Mentos into a plastic bottle of Coke, set it on the ground, and watched it explode all over the audience. A few people ran around in hairy animal masks. Laracuate confirmed that a few people took it upon themselves to provide renegade entertainment: “I really was trying to create a dynamic space that had the energy of activity,” he said. “It’s effective if people came here and felt like they could perform uninvited.”

I focused on the performances that stretched out over the whole evening, like Evan Scott-Rubin and Lola Rose Thompson’s “I Believe,” where the two women

ANDREA BAUER



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