

# "Do, Did, Done" Does It

## Performance art at the University Gallery

By F.S. Fraill

This month and next, the University Gallery at UMass will be presenting "Do, Did, Done," a series of four artists' performances and exhibitions organized by Curator Helaine Posner. "Do, Did, Done" is the first such series to be held at the gallery, and should serve to inform and expand people's understanding of what performance art is all about. The four performances take place on Tuesday evenings at 8, Feb. 8 and 15 and March 1 and 8 in the main gallery room. The University Gallery is located on the west end of the Fine Arts Center. All performances are free and open to the public.

The term sounds awkward, redundant, maybe—performance art—but in fact, performance art is a compounding of interests, of media, a pairing of the attributes of performance, of theatre, movement and sound with the qualities and goals of the visual arts. Live performance serves as a visual medium.

Theater has always been a visual medium; excepting radio plays, theatre is an event we see and watch, as much as we hear it. Performance art brings the visual element to the fore through emphasis on costume, props and sets, on gesture and movement.

In these times of ubiquitous video, even the most short-lived phenomena can be visually recorded for posterity, but in the case of performance art, the work then becomes artwork of a different kind. Performance art is a means of countering "art as commodity"; because of its ephemeral nature, it cannot be owned, even by the artist. Performance art is given to the audience, and possession depends upon the capacities of the viewers' minds, memories and hearts to hold onto it.

Performance art has become a popular medium. Its history, by some accounts, goes back to Oscar Schlemmer's theatre of the Bauhaus in the '20s. Schlemmer's pieces, which used striking geometric sets and abstract costumes, were intended to be contained within the time and space of the performance, instead of extending beyond them. The happenings of the '60s are clear progenitors of performance art.

Performance art is also a flexible medium, allowing the artist to include any, many of the myriad forms that performing as an art and as an entertainment has taken. A performance may be strenuous and taxing for both performer and audience; it can also be comical, satirical, absorbing, alienating, mystifying, magical. If there's one thing performance art pieces have in common, it's stylization. Presentations have been edited and designed for impact, but that doesn't mean performances are pat—variations and improvisation seem as integral.

"Do, Did, Done" presents four artists, and as a sampling of performance art offers an idea of the medium's infinite possibilities.

Jeff Way, the first artist to appear in the series, has been performing since 1974, painting since the late '60s. A native of Ohio, his mother ran the Jean Way School of Dance (his sister dances with Twyla Tharp), and he explained in a *Voice* interview, "I danced until I was old enough to

resist. Then I played football." In college, he played defense and studied art history.

Catlin, a 19th-century American artist who painted portraits of Indians, scenes of western life and landscapes; shamanism; and Bananaman. Bananaman used to appear on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, a clown wearing a huge coat over countless layers of costumes who would transform himself into a number of different characters.

Way calls his performance "Transformations," and it combines the ways of the shaman, the religious magician, with the vaudevillian feel of Bananaman's act. Way comes on stage wearing all his costumes and with a full complement of masks and accessories, including rattles, and becomes a jester, a clown, a bag lady, a painter with a receding hairline, a medicine man—and as Ed Sullivan might say, much, much, more.

What makes Way interesting are the contradictions and the harmonies. An Ohio small-town boy, a New York City artist. A dancer, a jock. A man with a Welsh name that people think is Chinese. An artist whose work reflects a strong interest in history, presented in an ephemeral form. A painter who does paintings of Jesus and Elvis, Buffalo Bill and Fred Astaire. Religion and art, art and pop culture. History and magic—how things happened, how things can't happen, but do. And essential to transformation, the contradiction, the paradox of metamorphosis, creation and destruction paired, their essences mingled.

But all that sounds pretty pretentious, and Way somehow avoids pretentiousness (pretense is something else entirely). His work is ritualistic and allusive, funny and stirring; a show that is often described as "electric." Way performs February 8 and some of his Elvis and Jesus paintings will be on exhibit.

Alex Grey's main concern right now is the threat of nuclear holocaust and that's the subject of recent performances he has given: "Mutually Assured Destruction," in which he set a painting of Russian and American flags on fire; "Wasteland," in which a couple is literally (nuclear) blasted to hell where they dine on money, then throw it up.

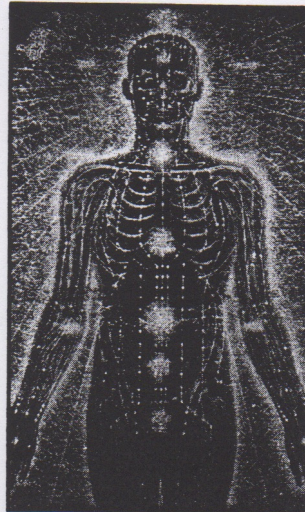
But death has been a theme of Grey's art, a subject under investigation, for at least 10 years, a near-third of this life. Maybe that's what led him to work in a morgue on and off for four years, or to perform "Deep Freeze," in which he spent three minutes in an unlit freezer containing 20 dead people, or "Dance With Death," in which he danced to Bach organ music with a human skeleton.

Death, according to Grey, is "a rich source." Companion subjects to death, of course, are as vital as energy, as profound as time, as material as flesh. Symbols like clocks and skeletons and skulls (which are as much artifacts of life as *mementos mori*) recur in his performance works. In his paintings "Sacred Mirrors" done over the last four years, the body reigns. Grey has painted lifesize, precisely realistic portraits of nude men and women, Caucasian, Oriental and Black; some of the portraits go beyond, or beneath nudity, showing the cardiovascular system, the nervous system (Grey has worked as a medical illustrator). And some beyond the literal: There are paintings of "the life energy system," "the psychic energy system," "the universal mind lattice"—in the last, the body becomes a swirl of spirals, sprays of an intricate fountain.

When an artist is so obviously working in capital letters—Life, Death, Energy—he runs the risk of being thought ponderous, heavy-handed, even silly. And some of Grey's works do sound silly, but he also comes across so earnest, so brave. And there's invention on his side, too. His list of performances is not only long but impressive, in some cases, because they go to such lengths. Besides "Deep Freeze," there was "Polar Wandering." Grey flew and snowmobiled to the North Magnetic Pole in the Arctic. Once inside the magnetic field, he took off his clothes, took photographs of himself, and ran in a circle. Of the experience, he wrote, "I felt I had dissolved into a pure energy state and become one with the magnetic field surrounding the earth."



New Yorker Ann Magnuson. (Amy Arbus photo)



One of Alex Grey's "Sacred Mirrors."



Fab Five Freddy. (Marcia Resnick photo)

And there was "Human Race." Last summer, Grey lay down on a vehicle consisting of a small, gas-powered motor, a platform and an undercarriage holding a skeleton. The vehicle was anchored in cement at one end and as it spun, it got up to a speed of 25-30 m.p.h. Suddenly, the base broke loose and the vehicle headed straight for the audience, being stopped just in time by Grey.

When Grey performs February 15, with his wife Allyson and their baby, the performance will be slower and human-powered. The performance, "Prayer Wheel," will involve a carved Tibetan prayer wheel and a skeleton. On exhibit will be the "Sacred Mirrors." Grey has said of his work: "I know there's a lot of questions about my work. Many times I have a lot of questions myself about why pieces are done. But I think of the universe as a university, as a teaching instrument. So I'm not really concerned with presenting an entertaining form or a theatrical piece as much as examining who I am. It's an ongoing meditation on mortality."

In March, two masters of style from New York City comprise the second half of the series. The first is Fab Five Freddy, or Frederic Brathwaite as he was born. Fab Five Freddy takes his signature from the now disbanded graffiti squad, the Fabulous Five, of which he was a founding member. No mere vandalism, Fred's work transformed battered subway cars into moving, vibrant paintings. Fred has become a well-known artist, with exhibits in Rome and Milan, as well as downtown New York clubs and galleries—The Kitchen, Club 57, the Mudd Club, the Fun Gallery.

Fred is also a master-rapper of rap music, that is, who served as a "consultant" to Blondie in the making of "Rapture," a platinum hit. He's also collaborated with the Clash and Chic. Last summer, he toured with the Kitchen Sync, a group of musicians and performing artists that travelled all over the country. (*The New York Times* has described the Kitchen, at various times, as "New York's leading showcase for experimental avant-garde music," "the premier exhibition space for video art," and as presenting "the best in experimental dance.") Currently, Fred is working on a film being made by Charlie O'Hearn, *Wild Style*, and funded by German television.

When Fred comes to the gallery March 1, he'll show off his rapping talents and produce a graffiti work as well. In the past, Fred has complained about shows given in concert halls: "It is inconceivable that people could go through a show like this sitting down. The whole idea is to move to the rhythm with your head and your body. Where I come from, the real dub boys come right up to the front to swing with the energy. To defy the conventional. None of this sitting down shit, but moving with the groove."

Ann Magnuson's idea of being upwardly mobile is performing in an elevator. In her piece of that name, "Upwardly Mobile," she did perform in Danceteria's elevator. The promo for the event read, "Experience the purgatorial ennui of America's finest in elevator entertainment."

Magnuson grew up in suburbia, West Virginia style, watching lots of television, performing in community shows, ballet recitals and neighborhood plays, eventually studying theatre in college and in London. She has a touch of the southern belle, lots of style, her outrageousness carried off with wit.

In New York, she managed Club 57, a community youth center in the basement of the Holy Cross Polish National Church on St. Mark's Place, with such ingenuity that it became a hot spot. There were screenings of drive-in movies; she organized a monster-movie club and theme parties: "A Salute to Lawrence Welk," an armchair tour of the Middle East called "Iran, Iraq, Iroll."

Magnuson's own performance pieces are parodies of pop-cultural heroines real and fictional, such as Joey Hetherton ("vegas burlesque"), Patsy Cline (country-western), Anacani ("disco italiano") or "La Dolce Vita '81"), Linda Belle ("Up With People") and Barbi, of Barbi and the Heftones. Her performance March 8 should wind up the series with a bang. □