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RAMON FELIX

THE CONDUCTOR

INTERVIEW BY DREW DENNY

"I became obsessed with the idea of the conductor when I realized what a great metaphor it is."

Nicole Miller's first solo show mashes a psychedelic video background, a Jimi Hendrix t-shirt and the trope of the orchestral conductor to defy the stability of stereotype. 'The Conductor' is absurd, amusing and even frightening at times. Actor Eric Ruff mimes the gestures and expressions of a conductor, allowing the audience to inspect the blinks and twitches and tics by which an orchestral leader communicates a musical document to his players.

Nicole Miller: "The Conductor" is a seven-minute-long static shot of an actor going through what we termed a 'facial ballet.' I went through many actors until I met Eric Ruff. I had him study videos of different conductors like Gustavo Dudamel who are known for their extravagant emotionality. Eric was brilliant at taking exact moments from these videos to create a structure of key moments to memorize and then interjecting that with outbursts of his own improvisation which became a constant movement through a whole spectrum of facial expressions.

What sparked your interest in the act of conducting? Do you play any instruments?

I grew up as a ballerina and playing the violin, so I was always aware of the role of the conductor. Watching clips on YouTube recently was when my eyes were really opened to the system happening between the conductor and his audience.

I was totally entranced when I watched *The Conductor*. At times I found the facial expressions quite scary but sometimes I laughed out loud. How are you hoping people react? How does it make you feel?

Eric's constant back-and-forth between memorized movements and improvisation became visually confused so that at times he looks like a schizophrenic from the street and moments later like a skilled auteur. I became very excited by the prospect of having a figure of authority—a conductor—who is also a performer that refuses to be placed in any one instant of any recognizable character. Particularly—as a black man—it was important for me that Eric's face would appear to be running itself away from any one representation and out of any kind of stagnation. On the day of the shoot, Eric brought with him his own wardrobe. I had just given a lecture about my work to a class of undergraduate students at USC and opened up my lecture with a clip from Jimi Hendrix playing 'Wild Thing' at the Monterey Pop Festival. He is also a figure that is not known for his skin color but for the great unfathomable new skill that he held—and his face was contorting and concentrated during his performance as well. Eric brought with him a brown shirt with Jimi's face on it and I immediately knew that it was right.

What semiotic value—or intrigue—do you find in the conductor's translation of the written score to facial expressions and gestures?

I became obsessed with the idea of the conductor when I realized what a great metaphor it is. The conductor is literally taking a score and acting as a transmitter of that information to an audience. This transmission is then manifested into sound. This is the reason that my video is silent, because the performance of the conductor creates a chain reaction that causes the creation of the music, but definitely precedes the actual event of the sound. I look at image making in this way—of being on the precipice of a sort of chain reaction that can potentially manifest in many ways into an audience's reality. Eric as

an unstable character that is transmitting information through his performance is very important for me—it is an attempt to defy the stability of stereotype.

Is this attempt something you pursue in all your work?

A major factor in all of my work is recognition of structure and how my subjects are placed within that. While the actor in 'The Conductor' is part of a specific structure I created, he has free will as a talented individual and capability to self-express. Despite this oppression of structure, I find ways to highlight the ways in which my subjects self-represent always, and I believe that this can help defy stereotype. My thesis show was called 'The Brownes: Five Brothers' and it used the form of documentary as a device that particularly highlighted these ideas.

Do you recognize this pursuit in the work of others?

One of the most important pieces I've seen recently that I felt really connected to was Mark Leckey's performance and video 'Cinema in the Round'. He is giving a lecture on ideas of the cinematic and dressed in a tuxedo. I thought of him as a teacher or conductor transmitting information also.

What do you think of the other work that's up at LAXART right now? How do you feel about being shown side by side with Didier Fiuza Faustino?

I think that the curation at LAXART is brilliant. I was so pleased to see Didier's installation. I feel that both of our pieces are bold simple statements—neither room overpowering the other, yet completely unrelated so that each experience can be appreciated separately.

This is your first solo show—what's the experience been like?

This was by far the greatest experience one could have for a first solo show. The team at LAXART is remarkable and I am just thrilled to be in line with some of the great artists that have shown at the gallery. To show in a space that has hosted greats such as Charles Gaines is just amazing.

Would I be correct to assume his work has influenced yours?

I went to CalArts for undergrad—I studied photography while I was there, so I never interacted with Gaines, but Edgar Arceneau—he has collaborated with Gaines before—was on my thesis committee. There is a definite lineage in the way that these men conceptually think that I really respect and have studied.

I also read that your work was recently featured in an exhibition entitled 'Psychosomatic Acid Test.' That's quite a name.

'The Conductor' had first shown in a group show that the artist Mark Titchner—who was recently up for the Turner Prize—put together for a residency he had at the Royal Academy in England. I was excited about this because I had been a great fan of Mark's work and of course it was great to hear that he liked my piece. The title of the show sounded so fitting! A trip that one wills upon oneself—I could understand Eric's performance in this way.

Who are you listening to right now?

I just drove down to Tucson and listened to a lot of Neil Diamond and Alice Coltrane on the way. Sort of a weird desert mix, with a lot of Neil Young mixed in of course. His music always sounds better in the desert for some reason.

'THE CONDUCTOR' THROUGH SAT., AUG. 22, AT LAXART, 2640 S. LA CIENEGA BLVD., CULVER CITY. TUE.-SAT., 11 AM-6 PM / FREE. LAXART.ORG.