

Play to Learn

PEA FACULTY AND A BOSTON-BASED PAINTER EXPLORE SENSORY PERCEPTION AND MEANING AT LAMONT GALLERY

By Nicole Pellaton

Photographs by Cheryl Senter

It all started with an email from English Instructor Todd Hearon to Lamont Gallery Director and Curator Lauren O'Neal: Would she consider showing paintings by Deborah Barlow, whose work appears on the cover of Hearon's *No Other Gods*, and hosting a reading of poems from the book? This germ of an idea quickly drew the interest of Jung Mi Lee and Jon Sakata, both concert pianists, transdisciplinary artists and adjunct music faculty. After a visit to Barlow's studio, where the PEA faculty perceived tremendous synergies between their work and Barlow's abstract, scale-defying paintings, a collaboration of multidisciplinary artists and gallery director was born. Over the next 18 months the initial idea expanded dramatically, fueled by what Hearon calls the "formidable imaginations" of the five collaborators, and they settled on a conceptual framework for an exhibition: the intermingling of text, sound and visual materials; an "amazement of navigation" to encourage discovery and confusion; and promoting sensory perception over analytical "understanding."

"Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation" opened on January 20 as an immersive, multisensory experience. Like its eponym — "clew" traces back to the ball of thread

Ariadne gave Theseus to guide him out of the labyrinth, and also refers to part of a ship's sail and hammock rigging — the exhibition encourages exploration and risk-taking. A futon on the floor invites you to lie down and look up at a painting suspended at a rakish tilt from the ceiling. A soundscape deconstructs the human voice. Mirrors reflect visitors and hidden fragments of text. Trays of salt and crystals provoke impromptu drawing. Magnifying glasses and flashlights virtually mandate up-close inspection. Videos play throughout the gallery. And nowhere do you find traditional signs explaining the art.

Some visitors assess the space warily. Others engage without hesitation. One woman spontaneously performs a shadow play with her hands, using a reading lamp as light and a painting as backdrop. Children cavort, making their own marks in the salt trays, rearranging mirrors and leaving drawings on the wall for others to enjoy. Meditation groups come to feel the energy and slow down.

Below are edited excerpts from conversations with the artists that took place at the exhibit.

Q: Can you describe your collaborative partnership?

Deborah Barlow: From the beginning, I felt that we were speaking a visual language. And a word language and a sound language that I didn't even know I knew how to speak. I don't know what I could do next that could feel this authentic.

Jon Sakata: We're very responsive to each other — whether we were exploring texts or visual experiences, sonic experiences, tactile experiences. Collaboration means something very different than "I'm from a certain discipline" — that's what makes this transdisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary. We return to our arts very different creatures. We listen differently, we imagine differently, we verbalize differently and we feel differently because of the work.

Q: I love your use of the word "transdisciplinary."

Could you expand on this?

JS: The transdisciplinary approach is already active in the students. It comes from interacting and co-producing with students in their creative work. In some ways this is a kind of, I don't want to say an amplification because it's not, it's more of a ...

Todd Hearon: It's not as much an extension but it's more of an analog to what's already happening with the

DEBORAH BARLOW, MARAGALLÉ, 2016. MIXED MEDIA ON WOOD PANEL



Lauren O'Neal transformed the gallery space into a series of thresholds that beckon visitors.

students, is that what you're saying? I totally agree. The energy that happens among the student body, that's where I always go when I want to be really surprised with quality and inspiring innovative collaboration. They are always doing that, it seems. "Clew" could be seen as an echo of that.

Jung Mi Lee: Something like this is an invitation, not just for grown-ups but for students as well.

Lauren O'Neal: I agree. It opens up what collaboration can look like for the adults in the community and how that can be extended to collaboration with students.

JS: There's something also about the duration. I think of the collaborative work Jung Mi and I have done with architects that has been going on for years, and our projects just keep on growing. That's something I would love to see have more nourishment here in the context of the students, and students with adults collaborating together, and adults with each other.

TH: The central ethos of this place is collaborative. This exhibit is very much in the spirit of what we bring when we bring our best selves to the Harkness table and to the conversation. Because Harkness does not work if I am so invested in my own viewpoint that I can't make it open up and absorb and conform with other perspectives. If I'm too invested in my own — that's not collaboration, that's juxtaposition.

Q: The spirit of play is strong in "Clew." How did you envisage play when you were developing the exhibition?

TH: We wanted to provide an experience that was very different from conventional art exhibits. Don't touch! Don't get too close!

JS: It's sort of like water — play is everywhere.

JML: Play is taking place at all levels. You change the formation of mirrors or do something with water or whatever. But as you're walking in, mentally the play is already starting.

LO: I think of play as having components of being open and also being willing to be in a space that's not known, allowing for the introduction of imagination and narrative. Every single person negotiates this space in a different way. I wouldn't always call it *playful*. Sometimes visitors are physically uncertain and tentative. And you see them touch things, and then they open up.

JS: Each visitor is actually part of the performative action of the exhibition.

JML: The reinventing of oneself.

JS: The *dismantling* of oneself.

TH: We're accustomed to think of play as something inconsequential and ephemeral, not worth serious consideration. But I think play is the condition out of which art springs.

JS: And aspires to.

TH: And a willingness to be open to possibility and spontaneity and improvisation. Not being fixated on a destination but simply immersed in a process of seeing what bubbles up and what connects and what diverges.



Todd Hearon shows how visitors can read his poem with a magnifying glass.

JS: Going back to your question of transdisciplinary — we’re not defined by our discipline. We’re interplaying with our perceptions of each other’s work and each other’s offerings and concepts. And failures. There’s a constant shift going on. And unless each of us were open and receptive and enjoying and playing, it wouldn’t work so well.

Q: Could you describe the soundscape that plays in the gallery?

JS: Ninety percent of the sounds you hear are Todd’s voice based on a recitation [of a poem by Hearon] that we recorded in the WPEA radio station. But then his voice has been digitally manipulated so you wouldn’t even

recognize it’s his voice any more. It’s been liquefied, rubbled. It’s been spun, made astral.

DB: Perfect words to describe so much of what I think is happening here: the fragmenting, that sense of breaking apart and reconnecting.

JS: And reconfiguring. Early on we discussed the idea that language is often a scaffolding that we use to be able to find comfort. We wanted to at least propose the idea that the only real vestige of language is Todd’s text. And that’s only going to exist in its total form in the gallery antechamber.

JML: And you can’t even read it that comfortably.

JS: It’s been reduced so that you have to use a magnifying

glass. The whole thing with the text being very small, playing on the idea of scale. We wanted to do that with everything — it’s problematizing surface and scale.

DB: And knowing. This is an invitation into nonlinear, non-knowing. There’s not a way through here, there’s not a path, there’s not a narrative that holds this in the traditional way. The way language is used in a visual setting is often so disarming for visual artists because it takes people into their minds as opposed to just letting the body experience. I want to understand this painting; this text next to it is going to explain what the artist was trying to do, so I can feel safe. We want to completely dismantle that. I see us as relishing in the rule breaking.

LO: This relates to courses like the epistemology class — the idea of what is knowledge and what is knowing. In this show there’s text everywhere, but it’s not going to explain what we’re looking at.

Q: You focus on disorientation as a way to broaden perception and experience. How have people reacted?

JS: It’s about trying to create a condition that is destabilizing. The more you destabilize yourself, the more there is to discover, to be rewarded by. As Lauren’s beautiful title implies, the disorientation is the payoff.

TH: The terms of disorientation, of making strange but in a good way — I think that art wants to make strange. Some artists would say the artist is paying you — the viewer, the participant — the highest respect by making it not facile.

JS: I just brought my end-of-term studio class. One prep felt very uncomfortable. “How am I supposed to look at this?” As if someone else was going to jump in to tell her. She deposited herself and settled into her own imaginative radar — which is immense. And then she was

About the Artists

Deborah Barlow is a Boston-based painter who has exhibited in more than 50 solo exhibitions throughout the U.S., Canada, Belgium, Italy, the U.K. and Ireland. She documented the development of “Clew” on her blog, slowmuse.com.

Todd Hearon is the author of two books of poetry, a devotee of the theater (as playwright, director and performer) and a musician.

Jung Mi Lee and **Jon Sakata** perform internationally as concert pianists. Since 2009, the wife-and-husband team has collaborated with architects in the U.S. and Europe, exploring intersections between music and architecture in site-specific installations.

Lauren O’Neal is a curator, artist, author and teacher.

See the story online for web extras, including more images from “Clew” and artists’ biographies: www.exeter.edu/clew.



Jung Mi Lee, left, and Jon Sakata created a soundscape, videos and scrim work for “Clew.”

free. Going from being almost imprisoned in “What am I supposed to do?” to becoming completely free to look however she wanted to look, that says a lot.

JML: I entered the gallery with one of my students between the loops of video, when there is a brief moment of silence. She was experiencing the visual stimulation, observing. Then the music came on, and she said, “I can’t look anywhere for a few minutes. I can feel all my nerve endings being activated.” I could see it in her physical appearance. “I need to get out of here.” When she came back the music was going. She said, “You know, the things that I looked at when there was no sound, I look at them very differently.”

JS: I don’t know if we actually talked about it as a group, but I know I thought about it — that no age has an advantage or disadvantage. When I’ve had conversations with students in particular about this, that was really galvanizing. Their perception is that when they go to a museum it’s already weighted against them because they’re young in experience and the adults have an advantage of perception, experience, history, whatever. This is exactly what we want to undercut.

TH: It’s funny that the art museum would rely on the assumption that the inexperienced or ignorant are at a disadvantage because no artist would think that. The artist loves amateurism.

JML: I totally agree. When we play contemporary music, most of the time people say, “I don’t understand it.” I understand what they’re saying — this is not like Mozart or things that they think they know. But it’s not about understanding, it’s about experiencing new energies from a piece of music.

LO: We haven’t had too many people saying, “I don’t

understand.” They’ve *embodied* that, but it’s less of a not understanding and more discomfort because they aren’t engaging through their senses. I’ve seen people kind of physically recoil. But the people who then, like your student, come back do start to attend in different ways, depending on the sound and the light. With one group, the visitors selected something to look at really intensely and slowly, and came up with their own perceptions. They all had beautiful things to say that were right on. If you had started with “this is what it’s about,” they never would have gotten to that level of nuance and complexity.

Q: Has “Clew” affected your teaching?

JS: For this show and all the work we do in music or outside of music, that is a kind of criteria for how successful or not the project has been — has it changed me or changed us? Inevitably, I think that’s what has happened. The valves of perception have gotten more attuned to new things. What’s great about bringing our students here is that it’s happening with them, too. We can now have this very different kind of dialog because we have this shared experience of mutation. We co-produce together in our studies of music, we co-experience, and then I think co-mutation can happen. Being able to have a conversation about that is really vital.

LO: This show has had a lot of individual teacher and student connections. But this is still Harkness. There’s this building of a conversation that sort of changes, ebbs and flows. Instead of being stationary, it’s walking, so there’s an element of journey — the journey that unfolds in the gallery as one of you is walking through with a student, or students walking through with each other. These conversations are like Harkness but spatially different. ■