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Roxey Ballet and Artist Malcolm Mobutu Smith Join Creative Forces at the Hunterdon Art Museum

Transcript

Story by Christopher Benincasa

Chris Benincasa:

This is Chris Benincasa for the Jersey Arts Podcast. This Saturday at the Hunterdon Art Museum, visitors are invited to a unique experience that brings together the visual and performing arts. Roxey Ballet company has teamed up with artist, Malcolm Mobutu Smith whose exhibition, Evermore Nevermore closes this weekend, and have created an exclusive 45 minute showcase that will be presented outdoors on the Toshiko Takaazu Terrace overlooking the museum's iconic view of the Raton river.

Chris Benincasa:

This event is free, but please register to attend. We recently spoke with Hunterdon Art Museum's executive director, Marjorie Frankel Nathanson, Roxey Ballet's executive director, Mark Roxey, artist Malcolm Mobutu Smith, and Roxey Ballet's director of education and outreach, Lees Hummel. Okay. So let's go around the Zoom table and do the introductions.

Mark Roxey:

Hello everyone. I'm Mark Roxey and I am the executive artistic director of the Roxey Ballet. And I am delighted to be with you guys today.

Marjorie Frankel Nathanson:

Hi. I'm Marjorie Nathanson. I'm the executive director of the Hunterdon Art Museum.

Malcolm Mobutu Smith:

Hello everyone. My name is Malcolm Mobutu Smith and I am the artist featured in the Hunterdon Art Museum show, Evermore Nevermore. Happy to be here.

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Lees Hummel:

My name is Lees Hummel, the director of education and outreach for Roxey Ballet. I also help write grants and I've been with them since 2014.

Chris Benincasa:

This is sort of a silly question, but it just popped into my head, do professional dancers usually like performing outside?

Mark Roxey:

No. They absolutely don't like dancing outside. Being a former B boy, and I can still throw down, for any of you questioning whether or not I can or not, just call me out and I can show you. I grew up dancing on concrete. I grew up dancing on cardboard and spinning out of my head. And for me I don't really get why it's a problem, but it's a problem for classically trained dancers for a variety of reasons. And so we kind of try to work within the parameters of what's workable. And so we've created a show that allows us to do it outside and also kind of pay tribute if you will to Malcolm's incredible exhibit.

Chris Benincasa:

Okay. So this Saturday sounds like a really fun experience out on the Toshiko Takaazu Terrace at the Hunterdon Art Museum. Marjorie, let's start with you. How did this event come together?

Marjorie Frankel Nathanson:

Well, it actually came from the Roxey Ballet. They approached us a while ago and asked if we would be interested in collaborating and we were thrilled. And we talked for a little bit. We showed them a list of upcoming exhibitions. They looked at it and they came back to us and said that they would love to do something based on Malcolm's show. We are so delighted to be working with them.

Chris Benincasa:

So Mark, where did the idea for this event and collaboration come from?

Mark Roxey:

When I met Marjorie at the museum, I walked the museum and I looked at a variety of the different exhibits that were taking place at that time and there was some of Malcolm's work there, and I said, "What's that?" And Mark began to tell me a little bit about Malcolm's work and I said, "Man, I would

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really love to meet him and I would be really excited about exploring his work and playing in the field of his work."

Mark Roxey:

And so that inspired me to go back and think about what pieces we might be able to bring to the museum to really honor his exhibit, which is a fantastic exhibit and really very thought provoking, is what I would say. And I hope that the people that get to see it will see that as well. So I picked some selections that I thought would speak and pair well with the exhibit that would be able to open a dialogue for what's possible really, for what's possible

Chris Benincasa:

As a dancer, as a choreographer, how do you integrate an exhibition of visual art into a dance performance?

Mark Roxey:

Looking at Malcolm's work is very inspiring. What I learned and what I discovered about Malcolm through his own discussion about his work and about his upbringing and how he came to be who he is today, I learned that there were a lot of things about Malcolm that were very similar to me and I could really identify in his work and in what inspires him and what moves him, including the genre that we grew up. We both share the same genres, same music, same anthems, same superheroes. And a lot of those figures and characters are really important to his work and important to the narrative and the discussion that he's trying to have with people.

Mark Roxey:

And I feel that what I do is very similar to that. So I thought, man, if I could just spend a little time in his work, exploring his work and just tiptoeing into it, that maybe something really amazing could happen. And I think that we're on the press that there're some things really happening in the future between Malcolm and myself. I mean, I don't know if that answers the question pointedly, but that's my answer.

Chris Benincasa:

Malcolm, could you tell us about your exhibition, Evermore Nevermore?

Malcolm Mobutu Smith:

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Well, this is really an ongoing response that I've had as an artist, dealing with the tensions and anxieties brought about by all the racial uprisings and exposure of the sort of insidious place that the American landscape is for people of color. And it was probably the first time in my life about 10 years ago that I felt the need to directly approach this subject matter through my artwork.

Malcolm Mobutu Smith:

And so I began this sort of work of sculpture that dealt with racial stereotypes quite directly to say, these things that we think are dead and buried are still very much alive and active in the cultural space of our country and I needed to put them out there face to face with people to say, "Hey, these are still uglinesses that we are reckoning with that I still dread sometimes even walking from my front door to my mailbox because of the location I live in Southern Indiana."

Malcolm Mobutu Smith:

And that I don't want to feel that way anymore and I need to get those ideas out there. That's essentially what they are. They are sculptures that play around with tropes of ceramics, they play around with tropes of modern art, and they directly redeploy images of some hateful and questionable images of race and stereotypes. Some quasi positive, but most of them have a kind of ugly underbelly.

Chris Benincasa:

Can you give us a little background about yourself?

Malcolm Mobutu Smith:

I do lots of different kinds of work. I have three or four different series that I work on, but mostly I make abstract vessel forms. And these pieces fall right into that aesthetic, only they have a little bit more graphic directness on certain parts of their surfaces that get to the point. I'm originally from Michigan, but I've lived in lots of different places. And I grew up in junior and high school in the Philadelphia area where I was first introduced and played around in the realms as, as Mark was intoning, of hip hop and graffiti and break dancing. And technically I've been beatboxing longer than I've been making pots, which I've been making pots for 35, 40 years.

Malcolm Mobutu Smith:

And so I feel a complete absolute umbilical and tether to Mark through that. And I was describing the miracle of finding out that Mark had approached Marjorie in the museum to want to do this performance based on him being able to read my work as being part of a culture that also birthed him.

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And in recounting these tales, I would get choked up and emotional telling my colleagues here at Indiana University about how this full circle magic of my work being birthed out of my passion for and practice as a graffiti writer, my passion as a break dancer, my passion as a beatboxer, and that it was legible to one of my peers is nothing short of amazing to me. And it still is knocking me out, so I want everyone to be able to know that those codes, those visual aesthetics, the jazz and improvisation, that is the magic of break dancing and wrapping and everything else is what I'm trying to build into the work.

Chris Benincasa:

Lees, I want to make sure we hear from you. What can the audience expect to see this Saturday evening at the museum?

Lees Hummel:

A wonderful, diverse production, events, dancers from all over the world. And just Mark's vision of all the productions we do is so poignant. It's original, it's entertaining. Just all of his work is always rooted in authenticity. And that's just really kind of what has always drawn me to the company is that they're very authentic, they're very down to earth, they're very real, and they really care about diversity, they care about working with underprivileged, they care about people with disabilities. They really kind of get the art form and what it should be doing to help people.

Chris Benincasa:

Malcolm, this is the last weekend of your exhibition. This event is also a closing reception for your show. What do you hope people take away from Evermore Nevermore?

Malcolm Mobutu Smith:

Well, I hope it catches them up and makes them sort of take a double take on the kind of things that they accept being said in popular culture, around them, that they listen better, and continue to react and show compassion to everyone around them. I don't think that there's a particular single lesson or narrative that comes through in the group of works that I showed, but hopefully the totality of their visual presence is inspiring enough that they catch their breath. And one side might be something that lures them in and another side hits them in the gut a little bit. And hopefully that resonates with them for a while and perhaps they're changed, but I just hope that they are challenged and ask a few questions of themselves.

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And Marjorie, what else do we need to know about this Saturday's event?

Marjorie Frankel Nathanson:

Well, it starts at 6:30. It's on the Hunterdon Art Museums, Toshiko Takaazu Terrace. It's free. And so it's open to the public and we hope you come and enjoy the evening.

Chris Benincasa:

And Liz?

Lees Hummel:

I think it's incredible, it's wonderful. We have such an array of dancers and the work that they're going to be doing is going to be hopefully just as inspiring as Malcolm's work. And I think they'll tie together really well. And it'll be nice to hear from Malcolm and from Mark in person.

Chris Benincasa:

Okay. Thank you all so much for doing the podcast.

Lees Hummel:

Absolutely.

Malcolm Mobutu Smith:

Our pleasure. Thank you.

Chris Benincasa:

This collaborative event between Roxey valet company and Malcolm Mobutu Smith off at 6:30 PM this Saturday at the Hunterdon Art Museum in Clinton, New Jersey. This outdoor performance is free to all, but please register in advance at the museum's website, which is hunterdonartmuseum.org/events. If you like this episode, be sure to review, subscribe, and tell your friends. A transcript of this podcast, links relevant to the story, and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found at jerseyarts.com.

Chris Benincasa:

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