

# GETTING A CLEW

## MULTISENSORY SURPRISE AT PHILLIPS EXETER

“You cannot move people  
Until you touch them.”

– Gary O’Neil

The above quote was coined by Gary O’Neil, an icon in the advertising/marketing industry in New Hampshire for 30 years and founder of the O’Neil Griffin Bodi advertising firm, who was wildly successful because he got the bigger picture. He understood that unless you touch people’s hearts, you won’t accomplish the ultimate goal of change – no matter what your profession – on a deep, heartfelt level.

The current exhibition at the Lamont Gallery at Phillips Exeter Academy, “Clew: A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation,” delves into the concept of touching issues, and ultimately people, on a deeper level. A multi-sensory installation, the show is unique as it simultaneously addresses the visual, the written word and music. So rich, you can scarcely take it in.

The show is an artistic collaboration that emulates the labyrinth with its confluences and unexpected turnabouts. Stepping into the gallery immediately becomes a surreal experience. Futuristic. Transformative. Ethereal. The stimulation is multi-faceted as the senses are bombarded with visual stimuli by Boston-based visual artist Deborah Barlow, while the ears experience poet Todd Hearon (an English instructor at Phillips Exeter) reading passages from his book, “No Other Gods,” while the dynamic duo (and married couple) of Jung Mi Lee and Jon Sakata, musicians who teach at Phillips Exeter, provide the diverse,

acoustic accompaniment to it all.

Using overlays of music, poetry and the visual arts, these four artists give viewers and listeners new ways to see, hear and navigate a tripartite, intricately layered world. Within the setting of the gallery, all three formats intermingle freely. The experience compounds and expands into a journey of multi-dimensionality and surprise.

The work sparkles. Literally. Sometimes projectors shoot images onto diaphanous fabric that displays the work as a moving work of art. Or throws the image onto a solid, white cube in the distance where you become part of the art as you move closer to examine it. A multi-dimensional configuration on one wall holds a massive piece by Barlow, but to participate in it you must peer through opaque folds of white filmy gauze, causing shadows – with some effort on the part of the viewer – to perceive the intended result.

Deborah Barlow’s stunning works bring to mind microscopic forms, or moonscapes, or simply nonrepresentational images of color, texture and scale that you can get lost in. Through an unexpected combination of pigments, metallic powders and a variety of substrates, her paintings wonderfully suggest the complexity of a multi-layered and visually rich



world. Her work has been exhibited all over North America and Europe. And yet, she said, of all the exhibitions she’s ever done, this is her favorite.

Endlessly enchanted by what it became, Barlow shared that what touched her, what drew her to be moved by her artistic choice, was her attraction to the mystery and immensity of space. “I found that words couldn’t capture what I was experiencing. Painting became my way of seeking intimacy with the infinite,” she said.

Barlow keeps inching out beyond the commonly shared version of

Deborah Barlow, *Vapeerine*.

**LAMONT GALLERY  
PHILLIPS EXETER  
ACADEMY  
FREDERICK R.  
MAYER ART CENTER  
11 TAN LANE  
EXETER, NEW  
HAMPSHIRE**

**THROUGH APRIL 15**



*Clew, A Rich and Rewarding Disorientation*, Deborah Barlow, Todd Hearon, Jung Mi Lee & Jon Sakata, 2017, site-specific installation.

reality. What is above and beyond our own reach? That's where she keeps heading.

So juxtapose the wonderful, large, invasive, sensual pieces by Barlow with the background sound of Todd Hearon's poetry. Snippets fill the room from a longer work from "No Other Gods," concerning the migration and diaspora over time at the Quabbin Reservoir in the Boston area. The poem's subject speaks of the wending of water, its convoluted and shapeshifting qualities are well suited to the collaborators' labyrinthian theme. Phrases float throughout the room, knitting the experience into a whole:

"...through rock & ruck & rill purl, pounce, pronounce & preen the sourceless flourish of your sundry selves, unseamed anima, antiphonal Ursprache, Ensembling in simultaneous tumult the babbling Earth's eternal tongues..."

Hearon explained the process of what moves him and what touches him in the creative process by explaining that, for this project, he viewed language as a heightened medium, self-conscious of itself, visceral and viscous, something to pull through very slowly. "And perhaps to lose a few hairs and layers of skin in the process," he said, "while very much enjoying the formal/structural component of word-playing-off-word and thereby generating sense and syntax.

"The presence and pressure," Hearon shared, "of the poet become nominal, negotiable and language itself begins to take over. That moves me."

This experience is further enhanced by concert pianists and trans-disciplinary artists Lee and Sakata, who believe that art is a practice of alterity – to introduce the alien in ourselves and to be inexorably changed by it. To be touched and changed – what is life without this?

A series of concerts took Lee and Sakata to China, South America and Europe, where they encountered exciting resonances/complications of artistic, social, cultural and political unrest that caused them to ask themselves if they were exploring and utilizing all of their capacities. They responded with a resounding "No!"

This understanding moved them to a collaboration with architects in the United States and Europe who were asking the same question. "Out of this," Lee said, "the five senses became 21, and our 'resistance,' which had been until then a single discipline, went trans!"

"Clew" helps viewers step outside of their preconceived ideas and expectations. The disorientations serve as cracks that let in the light. I viewed/listened to this experience (it's beyond "exhibition") solo, which enhanced the experience undoubtedly because there were no distractions. Ideal. It did indeed touch me and move me toward new dimensions.

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| Linda Chestney