

DETOURS: XAVIER CHA ON A LAFAWNDAH PERFORMANCE AT THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM

By *The Editors of ARTnews* POSTED 11/10/15 12:31 PM

Detours is an ongoing series in which a New York-based artist gives us a tour of a show of his or her choosing. This edition ventures into performance, with Xavier Cha writing about a show by Lafawndah at the Brooklyn Museum on November 7. Cha has an exhibition at 47 Canal in New York from November 11 through November 15. —Alex Greenberger

On Saturday, November 7, arriving at the Brooklyn Museum, I had forgotten how impressive and grand the building is, with its glassed-off lobby showcasing a temporary stage and packed attendance highly visible from the street. I was struck as soon as I walked out of the subway with a surprising yet accessible liveliness that was quite unusual from a typical entry into an art event. It was the Brooklyn Museum's Target First Saturday, this time celebrating "The Diversity of Brooklyn and the Exhibition 'Connecting Cultures: A World in Brooklyn,'" and I felt I was in a different city, not the New York art event I was used to. Throngs of families were in attendance, and the energy felt sincere, eager in a way I was unaccustomed to—thousands of people out to enjoy free cultural events and entertainment on a Saturday night.

The curatorial theme seemed overly vague and accommodating in a way I imagine institutions that are "family oriented" must remain. I didn't fully buy the very loose ties between artists who deal with "connecting cultures." What did this mean? But I was there to see Lafawndah (Yasmine Dubois) perform in the accompanying musical program for the free evening of events. It makes perfect sense why she would be included in the line-up, using unexpected blends of rhythms and sounds, I guess you could say a contemporary spin-off of world music meets Sade, dancehall, and electronic—but darker, sexier, and not from a historically white male's sampling of "ethnic world beats."

I didn't catch the woman's introduction of Lafawndah onto stage too clearly, but it was something to the effect of, "Yasmine has lived in many places around the world, and her music takes from these places and connects them..." Perhaps there is truth to the blanket statement, but what came through for me in Yasmine's performance was a mysteriously unique ability to cast a narrative web, letting it nourish, unfurl, and unravel over the audience who seemed all to be intimately taken and viscerally propelled through Lafawndah's unpredictable sonic journey by the sorcery of her stage presence and voice, the power of language and storytelling, the psychic and physical strength of rhythm. A metaphor of the senses with the political of mind, heart, and body pulsed deeply through the set, giving corporeality, defining organs, a belly, skin, and teeth.

The overall structure wasn't like watching a typical show or concert where a musician simply runs through their songs. The set begins with an empty stage—the voice of a woman, not Lafawndah, speaks casually in tone about a political uprising. One that no one knew about, it was unbelievable in its success and it was kept from us.

"You didn't hear about this?"

Really, I can't believe I didn't know this... I'm shaking... and it was just right here the whole time..."

Lafawndah enters, barefoot, wearing black Aikido pants and halter top, a master of ceremonies, of something both ancient and completely unborn, beginning with a slower soothing summoning into the ring. After a couple songs, she disappears from stage again; interludes of an offstage sub-consciousness weave in and out of the dream like travels. This time she speaks of muscle memory.

"And the process of getting stronger is the practice of muscles remembering themselves. That muscle was there the whole time."

A theme of a prior being, of a remembering, a struggle to find what's there when it has always already been, and who will be there to incarnate this, to taste, eat, regurgitate, and feed reverberates throughout her performance. Language and sound culminate into physical dialogue. Lafawndah leaves the stage a final time, we continue to hear her voice sing the last song, "Tan," as we witness something completely unexpected. Two shirtless men, wearing only black compression shorts step onto stage in what appears to be raw battle. With locked eyes they circle around with animal-like posturing, casing out their prey. They intertwine in movement that feels something between dance and combat. Set to the emotional arc of the song's beat, melody, and lyrics, the bodily language of complex interlocking movements suggest narratives of a back and forth struggle, a push and pull, moments of teaching, moments of aggression, vulnerability, intimacy, and a combined tenderness and domination. Rafael Reynoso, a mixed martial artist, loosely choreographed the sequencing based on Brazilian jiu-jitsu, also referred to as "the gentle art." Since taking on the endless journey of studying jiu-jitsu earlier this year, I've begun to understand how complicated and sophisticated the form is; it has felt very much like taking on a new language. Bringing this form of non-verbal communication onto the stage develops a deeper embodiment of the sentiments expressed through out this storytelling. In this art, the element of not knowing what will happen requires one to be hyper-perceptive of your opponent's movements, to listen to their body, and trust what needs to happen is already there, in your muscle memory, in your subconscious. The song slows to a soft whisper-like plea as Rafael and Zata Toscano's scramble subsides into locked grips, standing forehead to forehead, exchanging looks of yearning and understanding.

"Show me your teeth show me what's inside.
Show me your teeth show me what's inside.

Let something softer, softer, softer,
Let something softer, softer, softer
leak out of your mouth."