

The Next Wave Magazine 1996

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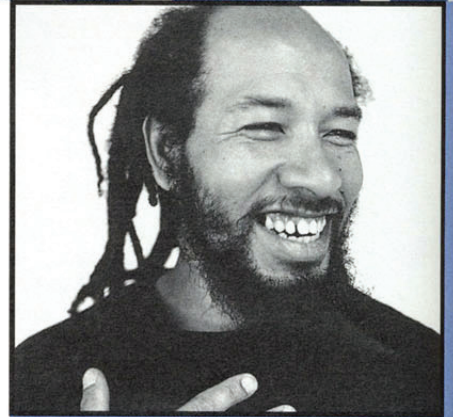
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Artists i

finding a new frame for performance

Imagine an unrealized space given to you to do as you wish. Would such a gift cause your body to seek forms arcing through the volume of blank, undefined air? Or would it stand before you as a static mass, bursting with negative possibility: an expanse to be painted, chopped, sculpted, filled? Maybe you would question the nature of three-dimensional space itself, or view it as a challenge not of mass or volume, but duration, and ask how to hone such space into the vocabulary of a narrative beat you'd never worked in before.

Such are the questions explored in this year's *Artists in Action*. After years of organizing collaborations between visual and performing artists, BAM President and Executive Producer Harvey Lichtenstein and Producing Director Joseph V. Melillo became excited by the possibilities of an experimental program born of a basic but radical observation: visual artists conceive of space in an entirely different manner than performing artists do. *Artists in Action* (supported by grants from the Pew Charitable Trust) is a forum to expand the lexicon and venue of performance by placing the creative responsibility of a performance piece in the hands of a visual artist. This year Jene Highstein, Rona Pondick and Albert Chong were chosen from a pool of selected artists.



Chong's work shudders with the movement and murmur of his Chinese African ancestry.

There is something about Albert Chong's art that has long felt as though it should burst into motion. In the *mise en scène* of his photographic work, spirits shift and blurred bodies scoot across the frame. Whether it be the two-dimensional field of the photograph or the three-dimensional volume of an installation space, Chong's work shudders with the movement and murmur of his ancestry. Chong is Jamaican-born, and the Chinese African influences in his work indicate that history and memory are its source of animation.



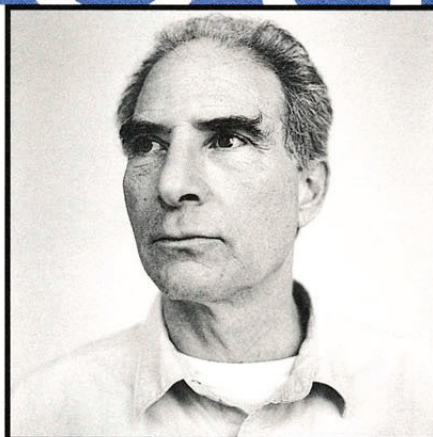
Action

by Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve

According to Chong, the challenge of *Black Fathers and Sons: A US Perspective* (to be presented at the BAM Majestic Theater) was not in conceiving the performance space itself, but in the choice to deal head on with a contemporary social crisis of major historical import.

"I haven't done performance-based work before," says Chong. "Not only does this involve a whole new way of thinking, but it's not just about me. *Black Fathers and Sons* developed out of a community-based crisis, not an art-based one." Cultivated in close collaboration with sculptor and sound installation artist Johnny Coleman, poet Quincy Troupe and LA-based performance art group The Hittite Empire, *Black Fathers and Sons* is about the current state of the relationship—or lack thereof—between fathers and sons in the American Black community.

The piece draws on vignettes scripted from actual stories of fathers and sons, set within an abstracted, atmospheric rendition of a barber shop, "a space of ritual and enchantment, of communion, where dialogue has traditionally been exchanged between brothers, a site that's not the church but is just as sacred, and more open," says Chong. During his travels across the US, Chong collected testimonies of fathers and sons; these multi-tracked voices, layered one over the other, will rise from barber chairs set in soil on the stage. (The chairs eventually turn into ancestral trees.) The structure of call and response which initiated the idea of *Black Fathers and Sons* will also be key to the live performance, so be prepared to participate.



Flatland is a poignant tale of high modernism's political correctness.

Sculptor Jene Highstein, in collaboration with performance artist Hanne Tierney, based his work, *Flatland*, which will be shown at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, on Edward A. Abbott's 1884 legendary tale of interdimensional xenophobia, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. Anyone familiar with Highstein's fantastically monumental yet minimal sculptures can't help but be bemused by his choice to animate Abbott's text. In it, A. Square's enlightening encounter with a three-dimensional sphere results in his imprisonment by two-dimensional society. Within the context of today's politically sensitive world, *Flatland* reads as a hilarious and poignant tale of high modernism's own screed of political correctness. *Flatland* is a gold mine for any three-dimensional-

ly-based artist, especially one as versed in the physical presence of basic geometric forms as Jene Highstein. While Highstein supplies the forms and three-tier structure of discs upon which the metaphysical struggle takes place, Tierney has designed an elaborate onstage control board—or moving grid—with which she will manipulate the shapes.

Oddly enough, their biggest obstacle was making room for the audience. "Traditionally, when you look at the square footage occupied by the audience and the square footage occupied by the stage," says Highstein, "the stage is about 20% of the space, while the audience occupies 80%. But for our piece we needed the percentage reversed: 80% is taken up by the performance piece and only 20% by the audience."

Flatland

Snug Harbor Cultural Center

November 7—9 at 8pm

November 9 & 10 at 3pm

MINE

The Brooklyn Museum

November 13—16 at 8pm

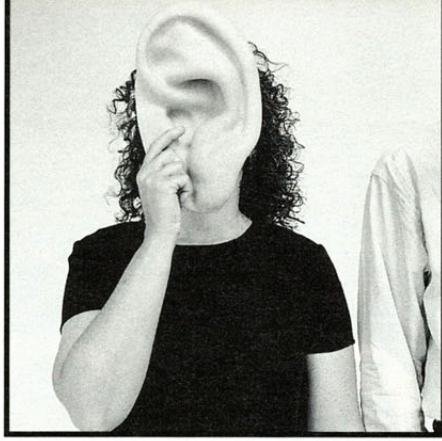
Black Fathers and Sons

BAM Majestic Theater

November 21—23 at 8pm

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Rona Pondick's piece promises to be equally hilarious and disconcerting. In *MINE*, coconceived and codirected by Robert Feintuch, Pondick's wild constellations of bodified-furniture and art-referenced viscera (where body parts and loaded infantile references such as baby bottles are sculpted into hybrid forms) are combined with Feintuch's obsession with the discrete object: ears, arms, buckets, clocks. Though married for 21 years, this is their first collaboration.

The production, which will be presented at The Brooklyn Museum Main Lobby, takes off from the concept of "mine" as an index of possession. With the aid of an impressive team which includes choreographer Sara Rudner and lighting designer Jennifer Tipton, the piece will riff on various semantic layers of the word "mine" (as an explosive; as a verb for digging). The work is non-narrative. Featuring a door, loads of ears spilling forth on the floor, and costumes covered with such phrases as "I want," *MINE* will be like walking into an animated, emotionally complex version of Pondick's sculptures.

"Oh, and there's going to be a snoring sequence," she adds.

Fathers and Sons is perhaps the most theatrically bound of the three works-in-progress. It will not have an afterlife as a sculpture or installation piece as *Flatland* and *MINE* will. Yet to attribute theatrical tradition to any of these pieces is to verge on critical malapropism. Ultimately each piece is about toppling such arch, art-world categories as "sculpture," "theater," "visual art," "installation" and "performance" from the staid and well-defended place each has come to occupy within the hierarchical heap know as "the Arts." If anything,



MINE will be like walking into an animated, emotionally complex version of Pondick's sculptures.

Flatland, *Mine*, and *Fathers and Sons* promise to perform such reworkings of classification and form. Or should I say "sculpt" or "mount" or "paint" or "provoke"? Clearly the fun of *Artists in Action* is experiencing just how such questions will bounce and stretch and shout at us from across the stage. ■