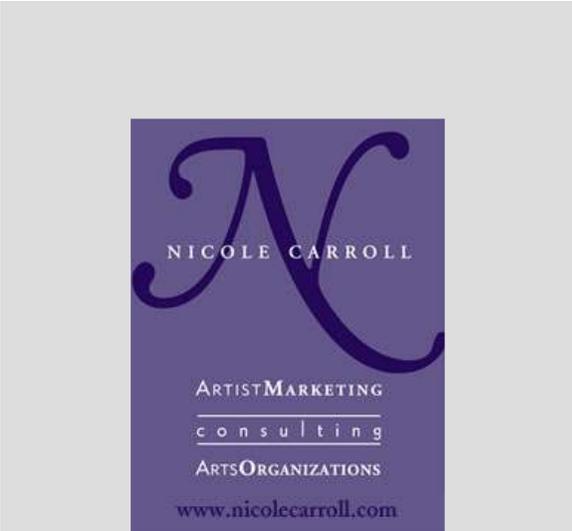
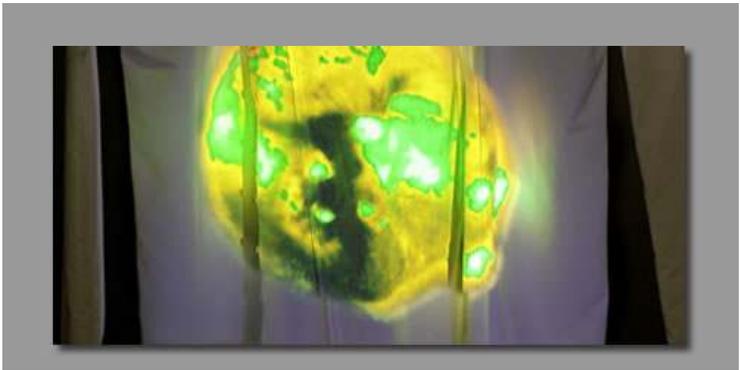




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sensational, surreal, ethereal: Robert Whitman's New Theatre/Art

by Abby Luby

Flames emblaze the length of two oars edging a wooden rowboat along the Hudson River. A horse gallops by, the rider levitating over the saddle. Images roll off plumes of smoke, water turns to fire, a Jupiter moon is projected on shirts. The sound of a backhoe gouging out the earth resonates intermittently.

These staged elements are "characters" in Robert Whitman's new theater art piece "Passport," a non-narrative work that will have simultaneous performances at Dia: Beacon and several miles away at Montclair State University, New Jersey. The performance at Dia will be outside on the banks of the Hudson River.

At Montclair University, the performance will take place inside on a stage at the Alexander Kasser Theater. (Show dates are Saturday, April 16, and Sunday, April 17, at 8 PM.)



Whitman, congenial and unassuming, speaks about "Passport" with the anticipation of a youngster going to the circus. It's no surprise that even today, at 76, he draws from his boyhood experience of seeing the Barnum & Bailey Circus at Madison Square Garden. Whitman's oeuvre has evolved with high tech innovations that have expanded his aural and visual palette. He excitedly describes the horse and rider activity.

"It happens throughout the piece—in the first pass the rider is flat on the horse's back with her face up, the second time the rider is levitating over the horse and in the third pass the rider levitates

up, disappears, flips and goes horizontal. It's like a slow-motion superman."

Art and technology have always been the perfect pairing of elements for Whitman; among other means of expression, they are vehicles to collect images and sounds from different geographical locations and to funnel them into another reality. He likens the results to composing music. "You might have something—like notes—happen in the beginning and the same notes in the middle and again in the end." In the script for "Passport," Whitman suggests that of the 23 "activities" in the entire work, the first and last activities are solid book ends for the performance, but "other events may be performed in a different order, to be determined later."

He chuckles when asked if he sometimes feels like a composer or orchestrator. "In the past I was the guy calling the timing, now I more or less direct. I am really invisible—I just set up the visuals and hope it works."

Whitman's work uses a certain degree of aleatory, or chance happening, an aesthetic heavily cultivated in the avant garde era of the 1950s and 1960s. The element of chance was key to the music of John Cage, who Whitman worked with and remembers as being a "wonderfully charming man." Along

engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer, Whitman founded Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) in 1966, a group that connected scientists and engineers with artists who, together, shared new technology and worked collaboratively on several performances. A well known project of E.A.T. in 1970 involved Whitman, David Tudor, Forrest Myers, Fujiko Nakaya and Robert Breer, all of whom designed and developed the Pepsi Pavilion at the Expo in Osaka. Whitman also collaborated with artists Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, Red Grooms, among others. He recalls the early performance



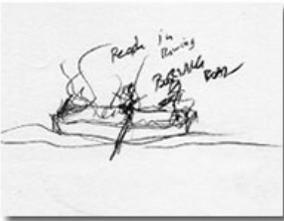
art theater as pieces of "the masters."

"You had to understand the magic of it." Whitman relives a performance created by Oldenburg that included Lucas Sumaras where movement of two people occurred in a tiny space filled with street rubble and lights flickered on and off at irregular intervals. "This type of performance depended on performers being totally present in the space," he explains.



The art world considers Whitman a pioneer of multimedia installation and performance.

"Passport" not only confirms this lofty recognition but also reinstates the conceptual constructs of performance art, leaving the experience open to individual interpretation. The philosophy is integral to performance art and one that Whitman has seen disappear and be replaced by artists espousing social theories and political agendas through their art, an approach he feels can squelch artistic expression. "It's like putting a ceiling over the art that you can't go past. It makes the art have limitations. Too many people try to be anarchists."

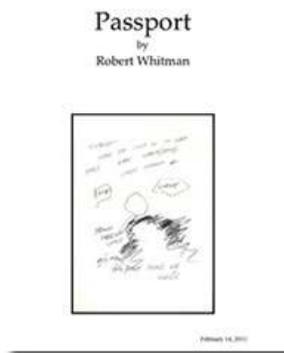


"Passport" was co-commissioned by Dia and Peak Performances at

Montclair State University. In Beacon, Whitman will use natural elements such as the river, trees, wind, and add even the sound of a passing Metro-North train; in Montclair, advanced theater technology will produce abruptly changing images, such as that of a performer walking upside-down in midair. The work calls for a full staff to produce a menagerie of specially built props, video, sound and live image transmissions from theater stage to river bank, giving audiences the sense of being in two places at the same time. Together, the two sites can accommodate a combined audience of more than 600.



Scenes from each venue will be shared with the other through video capture, wireless transmission, and real-time image streaming. But for Whitman, the technology is less important than the experience. "The thing is not to figure out how it is done, but to be present with the event. And the best thing ever is having a good time. What's better than that?"



Performances of Robert Whitman's *Passport* will take place at Dia:Beacon, 3 Beekman St., Beacon on Sunday, April 11, and Saturday, April 16, at 8 PM. Tickets are available through www.dia beacon.org, 845.440.0100

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