

NYU

CULTURE



■ museum

# BROOKLYN CANVAS

A NEW DESTINATION FOR BLACK ARTISTS

by Nicole Pezold / GSAS '04

**B**efore his death in 2003, artist Tom Feelings longed to exhibit “Middle Passage: White Ships, Black Cargo,” his haunting charcoal and pen-and-ink drawings of the capture, abuse, and deportation of African slaves, in his native Brooklyn. The works had traveled to countless cities around the United States, but found no host in the borough—until the opening of the small, yet ambitious, Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA), one of few dedicated venues for black artists in New York City, and the first in Brooklyn.

Even in a city with more than two million residents of African descent spread across five boroughs, contemporary works by black artists have for years been steered to the Studio Museum in Harlem or the nearby Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. That was unacceptable to Laurie A. Cumbo

(STEINHARDT '99), founder and executive director of MoCADA. “You don’t say, ‘You have the Met,’ and think that’s enough [museums],” says the Brooklyn native who still lives on the same East Flatbush block where she grew up. “There’s the Guggenheim, the Frick, the MoMA....”

“You don’t say, ‘You have the Met,’ and think that’s enough [museums],” says Laurie A. Cumbo. “There’s the Guggenheim, the Frick, the MoMA....”



PHOTO © CHRISTOPHER QUESTEL/COURTESY MOCADA

PHOTOGRAPHER TYRONE BROWN-OSBORNE IMAGINES THE MADONNA AS ANY OF SEVERAL BLACK WOMEN ONE MIGHT PASS ON THE STREET IN THIS UNTITLED WOOD PANEL SERIES.

Since its opening in 1999, MoCADA has provided a visual and cultural crossroads for Brooklyn's vast Diasporan communities—from Haitians to Nigerians to black Americans—with four exhibitions and 30 public programs annually featuring art-world stars such as Kenyan-born painter Wangechi Mutu, as well as new talent. Shows have ranged from painter Arturo Lindsay's rumination on his Afro-Panamanian roots to last spring's "The Post-Millennial Black Madonna," a group show on visions of the Virgin Mary by 24 artists, co-curated by Brooklyn painter and arts philanthropist Danny Simmons (WSUC '78)—brother of hip-hop magnate Russell Simmons—and event producer Brian Tate. MoCADA also sends artists into local schools and hosts an annual children's film festival to mold the next generation of black artists and museumgoers. "It's my goal to make sure that this is not a place where people feel intimidat-

ed, or that it has nothing to do with them," Cumbo says.

Rather, the 1,800-square-foot space often focuses viewers back on the events of the day, as in the case of Parisian Alexis Peskine's "The French Evolution: Race, Politics, & the French Riots," which debuted there in May 2007. Among the 15 mixed-media works inspired by France's 2005 riots and continuing racial tensions is "La Révolution de Marianne (Marianne)," a latex-on-canvas portrait depicting France's Lady Liberty, Marianne, as an African woman in a blood-red revolutionary bonnet. "It's important that this work be shown in Paris. The problem is that there are fewer opportunities there right now," Peskine says, citing both a less vibrant art scene and lack of access for nonwhite French artists.

For many years, a haven such as MoCADA was purely hypothetical to Cumbo, who had been drawn to visual arts since she scribbled in her first coloring book. As a graduate student, Cumbo studied visual arts administration at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, where the idea for the museum started as a perpetual class project. "If they asked us to create

a budget, or a Web site, or an exhibition, I'd do it for the museum," she remembers. "But it wasn't with the intention of starting an actual museum." However, with prodding from professors and a space donated by the Bridge Street AWME Church, MoCADA was born on the fourth floor of a Bedford-Stuyvesant brownstone. Since then, it has routinely drawn media attention, from the design magazine *Metropolis* to *The New York Times*, for both its aesthetics and mission. *The Network Journal* dubbed Cumbo a "keeper of the culture."

In 2006, in cooperation with the Brooklyn Academy of Music

Local Development Corporation, the museum moved to the center of BAM's burgeoning cultural district in Ft. Greene—just one block from Atlantic Yards, the gargantuan, controversial building project that will include an arena for the New Jersey Nets and stacks of sky-rise condos. "It's better to be where the development and excitement is happening," Cumbo reasons, envisioning that MoCADA will grow with downtown Brooklyn and eventually expand to offer concurrent exhibitions. "The museum can be a marker that this community has a stake in this city." ■



PHOTO © FRANK DUEMAN/COURTESY STUDIO SUNO

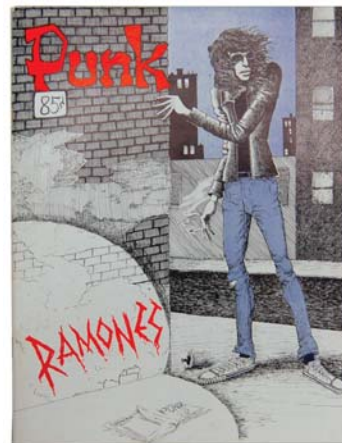
ABOVE: IN 2006, THE MUSEUM MOVED FROM A BED-STUY BROWNSTONE TO DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN. BELOW: MOCADA DIRECTOR LAURIE A. CUMBO (CENTER) WITH PARISIAN ARTIST ALEXIS PESKINE (RIGHT) AT THE DEBUT OF HIS MIXED-MEDIA SHOW ON RACISM IN FRANCE.



PHOTO © MARC ASHIN/REDUX PICTURES



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LEFT: THE PHILIP GLASS ENSEMBLE'S UNIQUE DOWNTOWN SOUND FIT NO CLEAR-CUT CATEGORY. ABOVE AND BOTTOM RIGHT: EARLY COVERS FROM THE FANZINE *PUNK*, WHICH CHRONICLED NEW YORK'S UNDERGROUND MUSIC SCENE FROM 1976 TO 1979.

# Bohemian Symphony

**DOWNTOWN MUSIC'S GLORY DAYS OWE MUCH TO MINGLING**

by James Jung

In retro-fetishizing times such as these, it's easy to believe that punk and New Wave single-handedly shaped New York's 1970s and '80s downtown music scene. But while bands such as the Ramones, Television, and Blondie grabbed headlines, the bohemian neighborhoods of Soho and the East Village were alive with a complex mix of sounds from superfueled punk, somber New Wave, minimalist classical, and rock-infused jazz. Often overlooked by popular culture, this cross-pollination gave

birth to some of the most original musical collaborations, according to new research from the Downtown Collection, Fales Library's eclectic archive on the art scene that flourished below 14th Street only a few decades ago.

"In the '70s, you had these clear breakdowns between genres—new music was performed at the Kitchen, punk at CBGB, and jazz in the artist-run lofts," explains Peter Cherches (GSAS '97), a prominent writer and performance artist from those heady days, who recently produced a com-

prehensive guide to the music of the period for the collection. "But by the '80s, the distinctions between different genres got pretty blurred." With this new understanding, Marvin Taylor, director of the collection, will pursue materials from a more diverse range of "downtown" musicians, such as Academy Award-nominated composer Philip Glass. "There became something that was downtown music," Cherches con-

"The East Village was like a mutant small town of freaky artists within the city. This climate fostered collaborations among people in different arts," says writer and performance artist Peter Cherches.

tinues, "but it wasn't necessarily rock or classical or jazz."

Nor did the new downtown music all sound the same. The musicians—from alternative rockers

Sonic Youth to experimental composer John Zorn—blended the sounds of this era in different ways as they passed through the same milieu. Cherches says: "The unifying factor was more time, place, and culture as opposed to sound." The movement culminated with the composer collective, Bang on a Can, formed in 1987 by three former Yale School of Music classmates. Noticing the fractured music communities in New York City, they kicked off the new society with a 12-hour marathon performance in Soho, featuring 28 young composers playing various musical strains.

While there is no definitive explanation for why this convergence of musical genres original-

ly occurred, both Cherches and Taylor point to cheap rents in the then-counter culture meccas—Soho and the East Village—which attracted a slew of painters, musi-

cians, writers, and actors who were sick of the commoditization of their work and intent on challenging artistic norms. According to Cherches, “The East Village was like a mutant small town of freaky artists within the city. This climate fostered collaborations born of social interactions among people working in different arts.”

Sadly, the period’s decline was sparked by the same factors that made it possible. Just as socioeconomics caused artists to gravitate downtown, by the end of the Reagan years, it began driving them out. “The stock market crash of the late ’80s killed off the East Village art market, and AIDS decimated the community,” Taylor explains. The closing of seminal venues, such as 8BC because of code violations, and the loss of some musicians to the commercial mainstream, contributed to the change.

Though there’s no telling whether a similar scene will resurface, Cherches doesn’t see it happening in New York’s now expensive downtown neighborhoods. And in our technology-infused age, he isn’t sure whether it could happen within any of the city’s boroughs. “The Internet may have made the specifications of place less important, which is a shame,” he says, but adds, “You might say that it has created the possibility of a distributed bohemianism.” ■



# CREDITS

## AN ALUMNI HIT PARADE—FROM THE MULTIPLEX TO BROADWAY TO YOUR LIVING ROOM

After penning a series finale that launched a thousand debates, executive producer **DAVID CHASE** (ARTS ’68) nabbed Emmy Awards for Outstanding Drama Series for HBO’s *The Sopranos*, as well as Outstanding Writing for a Drama Series for the show’s final episode, titled “Made in America”... **DAVID JAVERBAUM** (TSOA ’95) also won an Emmy for Outstanding Variety, Music, or Comedy Series as executive producer for Comedy Central’s hit political satire *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*... **EILEEN HEISLER** (TSOA ’88) and **DEANN HELINE** (TSOA ’87) are the women behind NBC’s new dramedy *Lipstick Jungle*, starring Brooke Shields and based on the book by **CANDACE BUSHNELL** (GAL ’81), whose racy newspaper columns inspired HBO’s *Sex and the City*... Renewed for a fourth season on ABC, executive producer **DAMON LINDELUF**’s (TSOA ’95) hit show *Lost*, starring fellow alumnus **DANIEL DAE KIM** (TSOA ’96), continues to follow plane-crash survivors as they try to escape from a mysterious island... Also returning this season are NBC’s *Heroes*, directed by **ALLAN ARKUSH** (TSOA ’70), executive producer **KATIE JACOBS**’ (TSOA ’87) *House* on Fox, and **DANIEL PINO** (TSOA ’00) in CBS’s *Cold Case*... After stepping in to complete the comic book trilogy with last summer’s *X-Men: The Last Stand*, film director **BRETT RATNER** (TSOA ’90) returned with a third installment of *Rush Hour*, which rejoins Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker—this time tearing up Paris... **WILLIAM SPECK** (TSOA ’93) and **JOSHUA GORDON** (TSOA ’93) had audiences roaring with their hit comedy *Blades of Glory*, their first feature-

length film. Now the directorial duo are turning their popular Geico Insurance ads into an ABC sitcom called *Cavemen*... **BEN GARANT** (nongrad alum) and **THOMAS LENNON** (TSOA ’92), popular for their roles as Deputy Junior and Lieutenant Dangle, respectively, from the Comedy Central series *Reno 911!*, traded in their badges for Ping-Pong paddles this summer to pen the comedy *Balls of Fury*, which Garant also directed and stars Christopher Walken, about the underground world of competitive Ping-Pong... Since directing Will Ferrell in *Stranger Than Fiction*, director **MARC FORSTER** (TSOA ’93) has taken a more serious turn with this fall’s *The Kite Runner*, based on Khaled Hosseini’s best-selling novel about an Afghani man who re-

turns to his homeland after many years to save a childhood friend... At this year’s Tony Awards, **BILLY CRUDUP** (TSOA ’94) won Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Play for Tom Stoppard’s epic trilogy of prerevolutionary Russia, *The Coast of Utopia*, and **MICHAEL MAYER** (TSOA ’83) took home Best Direction of a Musical for *Spring Awakening*, a tale of sexual discovery in 19th-century Germany. Tisch earned a total 15 nominations among alumni, faculty, and Dean’s Council members... **ANDRE DE SHIELDS** (GAL ’91) scored an Obie Award, off-Broadway’s top honor, for Sustained Excellence of Performance for such roles as King Lear in a production by the Classical Theatre of Harlem.

—Renée Alfuso



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AFTER A TEENAGE OBSESSION WITH HEAVY METAL, ADAM GADAHN, NOW THE AMERICAN FACE OF AL-QAEDA, TURNED TO ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM.

PHOTO © INTELCENTER

religion

# FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

## WHY SOME AMERICANS ARE SEDUCED BY EXTREME FAITH

by Sabine Heinlein / GSAS '07

**T**hey were just kids from California who grew up in middle-class homes, listening to hip-hop and heavy metal. As teenagers they were loners, but bright students with futures rich in opportunity—until they found a radical alternative. Today the images of Adam Gadahn, al-Qaeda’s American spokesperson who is on the FBI’s most-wanted terrorists list, and John Walker Lindh, the Taliban fighter captured in Afghanistan in 2001 and now in a federal prison in Colorado, embody a threat that hits close to home: They are the American face of Islamic terrorism.

These highly publicized cases give the impression that there may be an emerging “fifth column” of homegrown terrorists in the United States. While it’s still a rare occurrence compared to the radicaliza-

tion of Arabs in the Middle East or even in Europe, the lack of precedent and the unsettlingly familiar faces of these two young men, has experts scrambling to explain why fundamentalist Islam is so attractive to certain youth. “This is an incredibly complex question,” says Charles B. Strozier, director of the Center on Terrorism at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and author of *Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America* (Wipf and Stock). “There are no clear templates.” But rather than blaming something intrinsically evil within the fundamentalist strain of Islam practiced by both Gadahn and Lindh, Strozier points to a range of psychological factors, from mental illness to the pressures of modern society, which can drive such conversions. “Fundamentalism hijacks the religious experience,” he says,

adding that it becomes an easy tool for burying both personal and cultural deficiencies.

Experts have long viewed fundamentalism as a response to the confusion inspired by the chaos of modern culture. “People are drawn to fundamentalism out of their own inability to grapple, accept, and live within the enormous complexities and ambiguities that modernism brings,” Strozier explains. Fundamentalism has also been interpreted as a reaction to gender insecurities—what Strozier calls a “deep confusion about sexuality and the fear of women.” He says, “Growing a beard and walking around in a different kind of uniform marks you as being special and holy in an unholy land.”

“Fundamentalism hijacks the religious experience,” says psychoanalyst and author Charles B. Strozier.

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross (LAW '02) has tried to provide an answer of his own in *My Year Inside Radical Islam: A Memoir* (Tarcher), which describes his time working in the U.S. headquarters of Al Haramain Islamic Foundation, an international Wahhabi charity linked to al-Qaeda, where he spent much of

1999 logging e-mails, participating in group rituals, and pondering fundamental Islam. “I was hungry for answers,” he explains. A critical illness as a young adult, coupled with a “religiously ambiguous household,” where his Jewish parents drew inspiration from a variety of spiritual persuasions, had left Gartenstein-Ross searching for God. “Islam seemed to offer answers,” he says, but “in the process of sincerely searching, I got sucked into an extremist interpretation.”

As Gartenstein-Ross yearned for what he calls “a kind of theological certainty,” he grew a beard, removed his jewelry, threw away his rock albums, refused to shake women’s hands, and broke up with his Christian girlfriend. In return for these sacrifices, the close-knit group at Al Haramain offered safety and temporary relief from his nagging philosophical and emotional questions.

This theme resonates with many converts who seek a more rigorous or “authentic” religious experience, says Strozier, remembering an Evangelical who disdained “the easy beliefism of mainstream Christianity.” In fact, Gartenstein-Ross’s story is part of a greater tale of religious conversion, which has risen steadily during the past century. According to

a 2007 study by the Pew Research Center, 23 percent of the estimated 2.35 million Muslims in the United States are converts—a large portion of them African-Americans, many of whom converted during incarceration. As a comparison, CUNY’s American Religious Identification Survey

of 2001 notes that 37 percent of one million Evangelicals are converts. "Religious switching," the survey says, may be "a reflection of a deeper cultural phenomenon in contemporary America."

In Islam, Wahhabism offers a "muscular interpretation" of faith, says Bernard Haykel, associate professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies at NYU. The Wahhabis follow what they believe to be a pure version of Islam, as practiced by the prophet Muhammad and the first Muslims. They consider less orthodox Muslims or those of other persuasions to be nonbelievers, barred from heaven. From that, some extremists infer

the right to wage war. But, Haykel cautions, this does not mean all Wahhabis are violent or even different from other fundamentalists, such as Christians who adopt literal interpretations of the Bible. "Think of it this way," he explains. "You might have some very strict Catholics who are against abortion, but that doesn't make them people who blow up abortion clinics."

Those who do turn violent might be what Strozier, a psychoanalyst, terms "counter-phobic." People who are "vulnerable, lost, divided, or traumatized," he says, sometimes project their worst thoughts and feelings outward. "It's an act of self-defense," Strozier

says. "In a counter-phobic response, you construct the other as being evil. You experience yourself in great danger. Therefore you have to attack to avoid being attacked."

Over time, Gartenstein-Ross's search for meaning led him away from radical Islam as he began questioning the authoritarian style of his peers at Al Haramain and their enthusiasm for the Chechen mujahideen. He moved to New York, reunited with his Christian girlfriend, whom he later married, and embraced Christianity himself, although he is less forthcoming about this second conversion.

After Al Haramain's U.S. headquarters were raided following

9/11, Gartenstein-Ross contacted the FBI to share information about his former friends. "The least I could do was try to make the right choices now," he writes. "I felt a great sense of relief." This led him to a new career, as a counterterrorism consultant for the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and trainer of local law enforcement on Islam and Jihadist ideology. "I was obsessed with having a black-and-white answer," he reflects. "I'm more comfortable now with shades of gray." ■



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