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Mutual Muses: James Seawright and Mimi Garrard

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The Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville is pleased to collaborate with the University Galleries at Murray State University, Murray, Kentucky in the production of Mutual Muses: James Seawright and Mimi Garrard. I would like to recognize the following individuals for their contribution to this inspiring and innovative exhibition project. Creighton Michael, New York artist and alumnus of the University of Tennessee is credited for the concept and production of the exhibition. Max Weintraub, art historian and Director of the Art Galleries at the Herron School of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana, is acknowledged for his early consultation in the planning of the project. T. Michael Martin, Director of University Galleries at Murray State University is recognized for his astute curatorship of the exhibition and catalogue essay; Barbara MacAdam, Deputy Editor for ARTnews, for her insightful catalogue essay; and to Sarah McFalls, collections manager, Ewing Gallery of Art, for the design of this catalogue. Finally, this exhibition would not have come to fruition without the cooperation and support of the artists themselves.

Sam Yates
Director, Curator
Ewing Gallery of Art + Architecture
University of Tennessee
Mutual Muses is a two-person exhibition showcasing works by James Seawright and Mimi Garrard, who have been working together as well as individually since the 1960s. Their lives and practice have inspired each other throughout their careers. This exhibition is an interwoven love story featuring individual works by Seawright and Garrard as well as ones inspired by the other and those created collaboratively. Their life of interconnectivity as mutual muses is beautifully explored and presented in this survey exhibition.

Creighton Michael, a mutual friend and former colleague of Seawright’s at Princeton University, introduced me to James Seawright and Mimi Garrard. Michael and I had begun a discussion about the movement of Seawright’s early kinetic sculptures and their relationship to Garrard’s video dances. This epiphany became the catalyst that would lead to an exhibition inspired by their lifelong partnership. As Mutual Muses emerged, I discovered a seamless timeline of separate, but closely intertwined, creative lives, initiated by Garrard’s pursuits in dance and Seawright’s combining of engineering and technology with the arts.

After my initial introduction, I began researching the careers of both James Seawright and Mimi Garrard. It became clear to me that the works to be presented in Mutual Muses would reveal a progression from their personal lives, initiated by Garrard’s pursuits in dance and Seawright’s combining of engineering and technology with the arts.

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Through conversations with these artists, it became evident that the collaborative prints and virtual sculptures were developed from a combination of segments extracted from the video dances and documentation of the Constellation Sculptures. These video stills and the photo documentation were manipulated by the artists as a team and morphed into new collaborative works. This notion of collaboration became an extended practice for Garrard and Seawright as far back in their careers as 1966 when they collaborated on Garrard’s Seesaw dance piece and 1969 when they co-designed, with Emmanuel Ghent, the interactive CORTLI lighting system for Mimi’s live dance performances with the Mimi Garrard Dance Company. Several other successful collaborations with co-designed props, sound, music, and lighting followed. With Seawright’s tech-savvy knowhow and Garrard’s unique artistic vision for light and play through dance and choreography, they were able to produce an innovative performance lighting system. Certainly a precursor for what we all experience in live stage performances today.

As Mimi produced more as an artist, Seawright became more involved in the electronic arts movement happening around him as well. He honed his skills as an engineer and inventor to create kinetic sculptures with electrical components. His combination of technology with an art practice positioned him as one of the foremost technological artists, laying the foundation for many contemporary artists working with technology and other nontraditional electronic sensors and computerized gear.

Mimi Garrard studied and danced with Alwin Nikolais, an early modern/abstract dance innovator, at the Henry Street Playhouse in the 1960s and 70s before founding the Mimi Garrard Dance Company. She has created more than 90 works for the stage and more than 1,300 dances for video that have been shown internationally. Her videodances have been shown in festivals in the United States, Europe, South America, Africa and Asia. Her work, known for her interests in pure movement, theater, and progressive use of multi-media, was presented recently at Lincoln Center during the Dance on Camera Festival at the Walter Reade Theater and at the Library of the Performing Arts. Jim and Mimi received a lifetime achievement award from the Institute of Arts and Letters in Jackson, Mississippi.

James Seawright, born in 1936 in Jackson, Mississippi, was for many years Director of Visual Arts at Princeton University. Recognized as one of the foremost technological artists since the late 1960s, his works are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum and the Guggenheim Museum of New York, the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, the New Jersey State Museum at Trenton and other museums throughout the world. Seawright became a pioneer of interactive sculptures, often combining mirrors and electronic components in his work. He still collaborates and creates new work with his wife Mimi Garrard.

The University Galleries are grateful for the support of the Art & Design faculty and staff. I extend thanks to Creighton Michael who introduced me to both James Seawright and Mimi Garrard and his continued enthusiasm throughout the curatorial process. I thank the artists for sharing their works and for being so accommodating. I would like to acknowledge the Art & Design Technician, Jeremy Gasser, and the gallery student worker team for their assistance with this exhibition. The efforts of Shelby Adams, Chase Barrow, Matt Hahnies, Matte McClurth, Kylar Nix, Dakotah Vincent, Eriko Whittaker, and Amber Zycek are recognized for their assistance with the installation, and continued success of this exhibition.

T. Michael Martin is Assistant Professor of art and design and director of the University Galleries at Murray State University, where he has been since 2015. He received his BFA in painting from the University of Tennessee in 2002 and his MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2005. In 2006 he founded the Basement Gallery in Knoxville and later became a partner in Three Flights Up Gallery of Knoxville. He spent several years at the Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture before moving coming to Murray State. His research and curatorial interests include Contemporary Art, Painting, Drawing, Installation Art, Performance Art, Collaborative, Interactive, Experimental, Interdisciplinary, and New Media Art.
James Seawright and Mimi Garrard have long been natural partners in every sense of the word, drawn together by lights, cameras, and actions, as well as obvious magnetism. Mississippi-born-and-raised, theirs has been a merger of minds, talents, and complementary sensibilities—albeit, his more scientific, hers more physical and intuitive—but together, not unbridgeable.

They practice their art in the realm of accessible technology, both analog and digital—where the magic can be comprehensible and engaging.

James began as a sculptor and a mechanical tinkerer, learning many of the tricks of his creative trade while in the Navy HOC program, where he learned the basics of electronics. Mimi began as a dancer, studying in college with Lew Thomas and later in New York City with Alwin Nikolais.

When I visited their home and studio in upstate New York, James and Mimi quickly introduced me to a multitude of prints, drawings, and small sculptures filling their main-floor living space. Both have large studio spaces. James is a well-equipped workshop suited for electronic and mechanical experimentation. Mimi’s is 60 feet deep by 40 feet wide, with arrangements for hanging lighting instruments and projectors, and with a chroma key Marley floor. She uses the studio to create video and live dance for the stage.

At the start of my tour, my attention was immediately drawn to an abstract image that appeared to be a hand-rendered print. It was actually a computerized printout, documenting an iteration of a proliferating hand-rendered print. It was actually a computerized drawing to an abstract image that appeared to be a planetary landscape interacting with the viewers and the surrounding light.

James reminisces about his life and career and pulls it together in a succinct narrative, running from his early life in Greenwood, Mississippi, where he tinkered with electronics and was influenced by a music teacher and a friend’s grandfather who taught him to use machine tools. He had many interests while in college at the University of Mississippi, from literature to science to music. After three years in the Navy and now married to Mimi, he moved to New York. In 1968 he was invited to teach “visual perception” at the School of Visual Arts in New York (but as he remembers, “the students” weren’t interested; they just wanted to shoot photographs). He was then invited to teach at Princeton, where he went on to become director of Visual Arts. All the while, he was also busy making kinetic sculptures and large-scale public-art projects, working with light and mirrors and collaborating with Mimi on her dance works.

James remembers how, at the beginning of his career, he was living in SoHo and made one of his sculptures, Tower. He bought the components on Canal Street; these included a circuit board with over 1000 neon glow lamps, which he reconfigured as a three-dimensional lattice. To his surprise, the lights, once set into motion, worked. “I was amazed,” he says. “Then, I did variations on that.” Once he got going, he couldn’t stop.

In 1966, he boldly decided to go to MoMA and asked to see a curator, who suggested he bring his work around to galleries. His good fortune continued as he wound up at the legendary Stable Gallery. They looked at his work and then, “within a week,” he says, “called me back.” He showed them four electro-mechanical pieces, and the gallery gave him a show. The whole production could be viewed as a variety of electronic Arte Povera.

John Canady of The New York Times, in reviewing the show said, “Mr. Seawright’s inventions are the most successful union I have yet seen between contemporary art and contemporary science: they are as beautiful as scientific instruments and appear to be at least almost as precisely constructed.”

For Mimi’s part, she was obsessed by the injustice of the racism that surrounded her in Greenwood, Mississippi. That experience gave her the courage of her own convictions so necessary to being an artist. She attended Sweetbriar College in Northern Virginia, where she studied with Lew Thomas, a former dancer at the Henry Street Playhouse. She later began dancing with Alwin Nikolais and others at the Henry Street Playhouse. She later began dancing with Nikolais, and he went on to produce her concerts at the Henry Street Playhouse for 10 years.

Their collaboration began in 1966 when Mimi had an idea for a dance on a seesaw. James built a beautiful 16-foot seesaw with hydraulic dampers and created the music and costumes for the piece. In 1968, when he was invited to create an experimental work for WGBH in Boston along with several other artists, he asked Mimi to collaborate on a dance work. Their section of the program Medium is the Medium was called “Capriccio for TV.” It was very successful and had many showings. This experience inspired Mimi to begin to create dance for video at a time when the capabilities of video equipment for home use began to approach those of broadcast TV. Another of their important collaborations was the creation of a computer-controlled lighting system, CORTL, that began in 1970.

Anna Kisselgoff reviewed Mimi’s 1970 work Phosphones, for which Emmanuel Ghent did the lighting and music, in The New York Times in a piece titled “Dance: A Step Beyond Mixed Media:” citing Phosphones as “an example of how superbly integrated dance, lighting, and electronic music can be...The play of light with changes of colors and cinematic dimming with fade-outs, was as refined as its creators claimed. It would be impossible to separate one element from another, and this was undoubtedly a measure of the work’s success.”

Mimi sums up their collective career this way: “In the early 1960s, the trend was to take away traditional ways of working. There were rules about what you could and could not do if you were to be innovative. We wanted to be free and have the ability to work in any way that interested us. I wanted to be able to explore time, shape, motion, energy, and dynamics. I was doing multi-media when other people were doing pure dance, and I was making dance when other people were doing multi-media. I was always working against the current. James and I were never political or part of a group. We loved the process of working—that was enough for us, and it still is.”

James and Mimi have had to wait a while for their moment of re-recognition, but it appears to have arrived with today’s reawakened fascination with late-career and mixed-media artists, and a focus on work from the ’70s and ’80s. On September 28, 2018, the Whitney Museum is debuting a group show, titled Programmed: Rules, Codes, and Choreographies in Art, 1965–2018, curated by Dr. Christiane Paul, Director of the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center at Parsons School of Design and adjunct curator of Digital Art at the Whitney Museum. The exhibition includes James’ 1966 piece Searcher, an early sculpture, evoking a planetary landscape interacting with the viewers and the surrounding light.
The exhibition, according to the Whitney’s website, “links two strands of artistic exploration: the first examines the program as instructions, rules, and algorithms with a focus on conceptual art practices,” while the second “engages with the use of instructions and algorithms to manipulate the TV program, its apparatus, and signals or image sequences.”

Since 2001, the dances Mimi has been creating for video have been shown on television, in galleries, and museums. She won six first-place awards for her video dances from various film festivals worldwide.

The couple’s combined enterprise ascended to a new level with the creation of The Virtual Sculptures, which were created for video from the Constellation Sculptures of James Seawright. Eight virtual sculptures were created between April 1, 2014, and August 2, 2015, by manipulating images from the actual Constellation Sculptures. These sculptures exist only in video form, and are thus called virtual sculptures. After completing this project, they began to make prints from the virtual sculptures—prints that began with literal images from the virtual sculptures but which, over time, became so altered that they were no longer recognizable as being related to the virtual sculptures. The final transformation was to create both prints and videos starting with a single dot. This show features The Constellation Sculptures, The Virtual Sculptures, and the resulting prints as well as videodances by Mimi Garrard.

Barbara A. MacAdam is Editor at Large of ARTnews, where she has worked since 1987 in various editorial capacities. She has also worked as an editor for Art + Auction, Review: Latin American Literature and Arts, and New York magazine, among other publications. She has reviewed books on art and literature for such publications as the LA Times Book Review, Newsday, and the New York Times Book Review, and contributed articles on art, design, and literature to various magazines and newspapers. She is also a curator and serves on the board of the International Art Critics Association and is on the advisory committee of the Paris-based Arts Arena.
VIRTUAL SCULPTURE
James Seawright
Mimi Garrard
Untitled (KY 5), 2018
archival digital print
20 x 20 inches

James Seawright
Mimi Garrard
Untitled (KY 6), 2018
archival digital print
20 x 20 inches
James Seawright
Mimi Garrard
Untitled (KY 22), 2018
archival digital print
20 x 24 inches
James Seawright
Mimi Garrard
Untitled (KY 9), 2018
archival digital print
20 x 24 inches
James Seawright

Corona Arc, 2006
9.25 x 9.25 x 12 inches

James Seawright

Gemini, 2004
15 x 15 x 17 inches
MIMI GARRARD VIDEODANCES

Mimi Garrard
top still from Sam and Michael
dancer, Samuel Roberts

bottom, still from Time Three
dancer, Austen Selden

Mimi Garrard
still from Intimate Spaces
dancer, Omagbitse Omagbemi
Mimi Garrard
still from Dai Jian Suite
dancer, Dai Jian

previous spread, still from A Single Hound
dancer, Austen Selden

Mimi Garrard
still from Time Two JR
dancer, Samuel Roberts
JAMES SEAWRIGHT

EDUCATION
1957 BA University of Mississippi

TEACHING
2009-present Professor of Visual Art, emeritus, Princeton University
1974-2009 Director of the Visual Arts Program, Princeton University

SELECTED SOLO AND GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2019 Mutual Muse, Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN
2018 Mutual Muse, Clara M. Eagle Gallery, Murray State University, Murray, KY
2010 Princeton University Art Museum / Lewis Center for the Arts, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ
2006 O. K. Harris Gallery, New York, NY
2005 Constellations, William Patterson University, Wayne, NJ
1998 Walter Anderson Museum, Ocean Springs, MS
1997 Annual Invitational Exhibition, American Academy of Arts and Letters, NY
1995 60th Anniversary Exhibition, AAA, Kean College Art Gallery, NJ
1993 images du Futur, Montreal, Quebec
1992 New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ
1990 OK Harris Gallery, New York, NY
1989 The Sixties, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
1987 P.U.L.S.E. II, University of California at Santa Barbara Art Museum, Santa Barbara, CA
1986 A Decade of Visual Arts Faculty, Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ

SELECTED COLLECTIONS
1985 Ben Shahn Gallery, William Patterson College, Wayne, NJ
1984 The Robot Show, American Crafts Museum, New York, NY
1983 Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH
1981 Works from the Permanent Collection, Whitney Museum, New York, NY
1977 Works from the Permanent Collection, Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY
1974 Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
1973 Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, AirpoArt, permanent installation
1972 Responsive Environment, New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ
1971 Works for New Spaces, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN

SELECTED GRANTS, AWARDS, AND COMMISSIONS
2004 Princeton University Behrman Award
2003 Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters - Lifetime Achievement Award
2001 Mirror sculpture commission for Alan and Adele Aids, New York, NY
1999 Stanley Seger Fellowships to visit Greece, Turkey, Sicily (1999-2000)
1997 Academy Award in Art, American Academy of Arts and Letters
1990 David Bermant Foundation Grant for Walking on Gravel
1987 Connecticut Commission on the Arts, UConn, Storrs, CT
1986 Permanent installation of sculptures at Logan International Airport, Boston, MA
1985 Sculpture commissioned for West Erie Plaza, Erie, PA
1983 Commission for Mobil Technical Center, Pennington, NJ
1984 Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, Sculpture
1984 Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters, 1984 Award of Merit, Visual Arts
1983 Sculpture: Mirror II, commissioned for Long Ridge Mall, Rochester, NY
1982 Cotonlandia Collection Awards, Greenwood, MS (Juror)
1980 Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, NY, “Art and Technology” (Panelist)
1980 Sculpture: Electronic Garden #2, commissioned for Long Ridge Mall, Rochester, NY
1976 National Endowment for the Arts, Research Grant
1974 National Endowment for the Arts, Works of Living Artists
1970 Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts Fellowship
1969 Theodoron Award, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY

SELECTED COLLECTIONS
Larry Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, CT
Sarasota Art Commission, Sarasota, FL
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY
Pepsi Cola Company, New York, NY
Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga, TN
Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MS
Museum of Modern Art, New York City
New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ
MIMI GARRARD

EDUCATION
1958 BA, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, VA
1963 Certificate of Professional Competence, Henry Street Playhouse
1963-68 Ballet: Julia Barashkova
1973-78 Ballet: Zena Rommett
1968-69 Modern: Alwin Nikolais
1974-81 Modern: Nancy Mehan
1978-93 Modern: Erick Hawkins and members of the Erick Hawkins Dance Company
1978-93 Eurythmics: Dalcroze School of Music
1980-85 Ideskindness: Andre Bernard
1984-86 Alexander Technique with June Ekman
1986-98 Yoga: White Cloud Studio

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
1971-2001 Mimi Garrard Dance Theatre, on tour: Master classes
1981-93 Dalcroze School of Music: movement
1987-88 Radford University, Governor’s School, choreography, technique, improvisation
1978-85 Teachers College, Columbia University, graduate program: production and choreography
1962-69 Henry Street Playhouse, technique, improvisation, composition

PERFORMING
1965 - 1987 Mimi Garrard Dance Company
1962 - 1966 Alwin Nikolais Dance Company
1962 - 1964 Murray Louis Dance Company

TELEVISION PRODUCTIONS
2001-present 190 half-hour programs produced by Mimi Garrard for Manhattan Neighborhood Network in Manhattan and streamed live internationally at the time of broadcast.
1972 “Boston Symphony Experiment”, produced for National Educational Television, WGBH
1970 “Enigma of Schindler”, CBS Camera Three
1968 “Medium is the Medium” produced for National Educational Television, WGBH, Boston, MA

SELECTED SCHOLARSHIPS AND AWARDS
2018 Award of Distinction, Arthouse Asia, Kolkata, India
2017 Best Short Video, Virgin Spring Cinestet, Kolkata, India
2017 Best Experimental Film, Virgin Spring Cinestet, Kolkata, India
2017 Best Choreography, Alff Alternative Festival, Toronto, Canada
2003 Lifetime Achievement Award, Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters with James Seawright
2001-2004 Grants to the Mimi Garrard Dance Company, Manhattan Community Arts Fund
1996-present Grant to the Mimi Garrard Dance Company, The Baumol Family Foundation
1996-2015 Grant to the Mimi Garrard Dance Company, The Harkness Foundation for Dance
1992-present Grant to the Mimi Garrard Dance Company, The David Bermant Foundation
1987-88 Funds for Video Documentary of the CORLTLIGHTING SYSTEM, The Mary Duke Biddle Foundation
1976 Special Projects Grant for compositional version of computer controlled lighting system
National Endowment for the Arts
1973 Choreography Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2018 Pentacle Presentation, Brooklyn, NY
2012 International Videodance Festival, Sao Carlos, Brazil
2001 International Videodance Festival, Sao Carlos, Brazil
2007 Velez October Circles, BBB BIG SCREEN, United Kingdom
2006 Time, Instituto Cultural Peruano, Lima, Peru

EXHIBITIONS WITH JAMES SEAWRIGHT
2019 Mutual Muse, Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN
2018 Mutual Muse, Clara M. Eagle Gallery, Murray State University, Murray, KY
2015 Homecoming, Museum Of The Mississippi Delta, Greenwood, MS
2015 Welty Biennal, Jackson, MS

GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2016 Chromatic Space, American Abstract Artists, New York, NY
2016 Visible Histories, Morris-Warren Gallery, New York, NY
2005 Endless Entire, American Abstract Artists, Five Myles, Brooklyn, NY
2014 To Leo, A Tribute from AAA, American Abstract Artists, Sideshow Gallery Brooklyn, NY

SELECTED INTERNATIONAL FILM AND VIDEO FESTIVALS
2018 Five Continents International Film Festival, Puerto La Cruz, Venezuela
2018 Feel The Reel International Film Festival, Glasgow, Scotland
2018 Europa Film Festival, Barcelona, Spain
2018 Encore Dance On Film, Decatur, GA
2018 16th Festival Internazional Sergi Della Rotte, Urbino, Italy
2018 Down East Flick Fest, Greenville, NC
2018 Europe Film Festival, Barcelona, Spain
2018 Move Me Productions, Antwerp, Belgium
2018 Virgin Spring Cinestet Kolkata, West Bengal, India
2018 The People’s Public Media Awards Of Excellence, New York, NY
2018 Short Stop International Film Festival, Lasi, Romania
2018 Arthouse Asia, Kolkata, India
2017 Festival Internacional Videodanza Ba, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2017 International Videodance Festival Of Chile, Santiago, Chile
2017 Dance On Screen, Short Films At Rosey Ballet, Lamberville, NJ
2017 Arthouse Asia, Kolkata, India
2017 Fying Frame Film Festival, Simpson, IL
2017 Alff Alternative Film Festival Toronto, Ontario, Canada
2017 Hong Kong Arthouse Film Festival (Hkaff), Hong Kong, China
2017 Sams Souci Festival of Dance Cinema 2017, Boulder, CO
2017 Sao Carlos Videodance Festival, Sao Carlos, Brazil
2017 Rom Cultura Doc, Rome, Italy
2017 Frostbite International Film Festival, Colorado Springs, CO
2017 Los Angeles Cinestet, Los Angeles, CA
2017 Indian Peaceck International Film Festival, West Bengal, India
2017 Lid Off Film Festival, Lucas, KS
2017 Canada Shorts-Canadian And International Short Film Fest
2017 Sao Carlos Videodance Festival, Sao Carlos, Brazil
2017 Woodengate Film Festival, Bata Mare, Romania
2017 New York Short Film Tuesdays 2017, Brooklyn, NY
Installation of Mutual Muses at The Ewing Gallery
University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN