

March 8 2021 - April 21, 2021

OOPS! POW! SURPRISE!

Sara Zalek



DEPS Artist Profile

Glass Curtain Gallery – Columbia College Chicago
1104 S Wabash Ave, 1st Floor, Chicago, IL 60605

Gallery Hours: Monday–Friday, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.

Capacity of gallery is 10 visitors, and masks are required.

OOPS! POW! SURPRISE!

An exhibition by Cristal Sabbagh

OOPS! POW! SURPRISE! Takes a deep look at Cristal Sabbagh's interdisciplinary practice that includes traditional portraiture, ceramics, and performance. While movement is the spine of her practice and the core that all her other work emanates from, intentional spontaneity, reverence, and bliss are threads woven throughout.

Sabbagh's performance practice, rooted in improvisation and Butoh, walks a line between the everyday, the divine, the personal, and the political. In embodying in her art transformational memories while simultaneously celebrating pop culture and the experimental, she challenges power structures and awakens viewers' senses.

Working both in a solo capacity and with collaborators, Sabbagh is equally attuned to individual perspectives and collective structures. As with Sabbagh's previous projects, OOPS! POW! SURPRISE! will also incorporate collaborative work. Her collaborators include Erin Peisert, Scott Rubin, Keisha Janae, Ramah Malebranche, and Sara Zalek. In various configurations, these collaborators have regularly engaged in improvised performances, opening up new avenues for Sabbagh's material and conceptual exploration.

Although her work is defined in movement, her practice also looks outward to portraits of the world around, taking the forms of traditionally drawn portraits, figurative ceramic sculptures, and nontraditional portraits on ceramic mugs. Sabbagh labors over each piece, that act as homage and memorials and are a resistance to white-supremacy. Her traditional portraits include images of Black Trans lives that have been taken or disrupted. And her nontraditional portraits take the form of Black creatives lovingly emblazoned on ceramic mugs intended to be shared by friends and family. Not only do these works infuse the user's everyday coffee and tea rituals, but their ceramic forms will stand the test of time, potentially outliving the user by thousands of years and leaving traces of how we lived, recorded by Sabbagh's hand.

Sara Zalek

Sara Zalek is an interdisciplinary artist and convenor of action based performance, rooted in physical investigations of trauma, resilience, and transformation. Their work is intimate and raw, poetic and participatory in nature. They promote the intentional act of disruption to create social and ecological change. Through Butoh Curious / Butoh Chicago, Zalek connects national and international teaching artists with Chicago independent art makers across genres including dance, butoh, theater, and experimental music. They collaborate to create opportunities for positive communication about underrepresented bodies and arts and life integration using workshops, performances, and convenings.

We are abolitionists. Our individual selves serve as microcosms of the collective body, and we yearn to keep our pulse together, to live, freedom firmly in our hearts. We wish to be trees like in the forest, interdependent, communicating and regenerating endlessly. Sara uses “we” as a way to reflect a multifaceted human self, multi-gendered and polymorphic, serving as a microcosm within the world context, like a cell within the body. I am not capable of seeing myself as separate from other humans. In terms of justice, I strike to find inner resolve as we bob and weave the systems of oppression.

saronin.com

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Formidable Dream, 2016



Freedom From Freedom To, 2020



Gold Test Intestine, 2018



Gold Test LM, 2019



Gold Test, 2019



No Edge, 2019

Interview with (name)

Conducted by Kaylee Fowler

Kaylee Fowler: What is your history with dance, and what is Butoh, and how do both of these factor into your practice?

Cristal Sabbagh: As a young person I was dancing a lot in my free time. I didn't have much formal training until high school when I took dance instead of gym. My teacher taught ballet and modern. Outside of that I was influenced by hip hop, and later in my 20's West African dance. In college, I was on dance team for two years and that was more about technique and precision within the group. Later, in my 20's I grew out of learning precise movements per counts and expanded to doing more organic movements.

A performance I did with a friend led me to Butoh by accident. It was an emotional piece about death and the spirit. An audience member spoke to me afterwards and said it reminded her of Butoh. I inquired to know more about it and she told me to see the artist Akira Kasai at the MCA. That was back in 2004. Ever since then my movement process has been heavily influenced by the Butoh dance form, especially as practiced by Diego Pinon and like-minded

dancers. Diego believes in performers being authentic to emotions, as well as simultaneously showing fragility and strength. His training involves reacting to symbolic prompts of his choosing, and the dancer must above all embody these symbols. Through Butoh I unfurl memories, connect to my ancestors and spirit, and cultivate energy to transfer to audience members.

Working with live improvised music has inspired my best work. I'm a core member of Marie Casimir's Djasporas dance collective, seen at the Instigation Festivals in Chicago & New Orleans over the past four years. The festival brings music, movement and visual artists together for a week of improvised and interesting interdisciplinary collaboration in each city. For the past three years I've also been a member of Move Move Collaborative, in Baltimore, Maryland. This group convenes for its annual 10 day movement intensive, where people from across North America and Europe come together to create a movement performance. We culminate with a public performance that incorporates improvising musicians. I included a short sample from last summer's performance.

Interview with (name)

Continued

I'm interested in breaking down the traditional barrier between audience and performer. This can take the form of breaking the fourth wall in a dance performance, seeking audience input to drive the structure of the performance itself, or involving the audience to such a degree that the boundaries of the performance break down until all that remains is a happening. To curate and perform in *Freedom From and Freedom To* awakened my call to bring diverse groups together within the performers as well as the audience. Creating an environment of safety and love is integral so that the performers can be as vulnerable as possible and offer authentic emotions.

KF: You are the founder of *Freedom From and Freedom To*, which is described as "cross-medium improvisation." What was the inspiration behind this, and how did you get started with this work?

CS: I was inspired to move forward with this idea after working in similar fashions with Marie Casimir and Steve Marquette's Instigation Festival since 2016. Marie is a dancer who invited other dancers from both Chicago and New Orleans, and Steve gathered the

musicians. At each iteration, whether it was performed in Chicago or New Orleans, there would be a week of small improvisational performances between dancers and musicians. It

was always different, electrifying and freeing for me. Similarly, I was inspired by being a member of *Move Move Collaborative*, in Baltimore, since 2017. This is a temporary ensemble, founded by interdisciplinary movement artist, Peter Redgrave, that gathers dancers from North America to workshop with each other, and eventually develop a piece for an audience at the end of the 10 days. For the culminating performance improvising musicians would join us for the score. Again having both of these experiences in my life led me to wanting to curate something in Chicago. I talked this over extensively with my dear friend Erin Peisert, who is also an interdisciplinary performance artist, and has performed in each iteration of *Freedom From and Freedom To*. I wanted to have a diverse group of dancers and musicians that would be excited to rise to the challenge to create something, and at times with folks that they may not have met before, on the spot. Another aspect was involving the audience to pick all of the sets by chance. My husband was the MC and had audience

Interview with Cristal Sabbagh

Continued

wouldn't be too many little rectangles to look at on the screen. You really have to listen and observe even more with your eyes when you're collaborating through a flat screen.

I was also on the planning committee for Move Move Collaborative which is normally in person in Baltimore for 10 days in the summer, but clearly was going to be all virtual. Working with a group of dancers, as well as a musician for a week, really opened my mind to what could be possible through zoom. We experimented with highlighting different body parts on the screen, as well as using props as filters on our laptop cameras, and different lighting effects from lamps, cell phones, and holiday lights. Since we had 13 people performing, we worked out a score and certain folks would perform in particular sections so that it wouldn't be overwhelming, and some of us mirrored each other for continuity.

Having time to problem solve the technology has really helped during this time, and the other upside is the documentation is instantaneous and can be shared with others if they aren't able to see live broadcast performances.

The last *Freedom From and Freedom To* was in August and the

performers were in the space a month prior my son picked the sets by chance from a hat. We spread it out over two nights, only had 5 people per set, and two sets per night. Everyone was masked unless playing a wind instrument or singing. It was such a gift to perform again together inside of a space, even without a live in-person audience. We were broadcast live through Elastic Arts twitch channel and the next one is planned for December 5th and 6th!

As far as my fine art I work from my home and purchased a potter's wheel. My good friend Carl Mankart has his own pottery business and I'm able to fire my pieces at his studio, but I do intend to purchase my own kiln soon.

The DEPS Artist Profile Series

The DEPS Artist Profile Series, presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance, and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community.

The DEPS Artist Profile Series is managed by Fine Arts major and DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Kaylee Fowler. Design, animation and illustration by Graphic Design major and DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Gianella Goan. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Learn more at colum.edu/Pow

Contact information: Mark Porter, mporter@colum.edu / 312.369.6643

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