



Meredith Monk at the Guggenheim

'Ascension Variations' New York City, March 5, 2009



Contributing Writer

By: Stephen Cedars

In 1969, the accomplished and unconventional composer, singer, choreographer, dancer and theatre artist Meredith Monk created, for Manhattan's

Guggenheim museum, a site-specific music/performance piece called "Juice: A Theatre Cantata in 3 Installments." Last Thursday night, both to recognize that show's 30th anniversary and in support of the current Guggenheim exhibition, "The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989," Ms. Monk re-staged aspects of "Juice" integrated with the music of her latest release, *Songs of Ascension*. As realized by 120 performers, including dancers, musicians, singers, children, and costumed quasi-characters, Ms. Monk's work was far more than cleverly staged and executed; it was a poignant, profound and fiercely unique occurrence that speaks to the fecund imagination of its creator.

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Meredith Monk, now and in 1970
[Photographs by F. Scott Schafer (L) and Peter Moore (R)]

If you've never been to the Guggenheim, it is itself an unmistakable work of art designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright. The exhibitions are showcased in seven rotunda galleries that spiral directly upwards from the building's center. It is a space whose impact is highly dependent on one's vantage point, since the art both on display and in the building's design works differently based on which ramp the viewer stands.

No surprise, then, that vantage point was a crucial component of *Songs of Ascension*. Following the same broad structure as "Juice," the performance was comprised of three phases. The audience began on the floor of the main lobby, looking above at performers appearing and disappearing throughout the spiraling rotundas, some dancing interpretively, some singing, some playing string instruments, some appearing as a group like a line of singers who undulated along the third level shifting their body shapes in sync, and some of them solitary, most notably Ms. Monk who, for the first half of this phase, stood dressed in red, high above, waving her arms grandly over our heads like the mad master of these various minions. There were also theatrical touches, like the four travelers dressed in vaguely Asian garb and painted entirely in red, holding tight around one another's waists and stomping loudly. Always, the railings bisected the performers' bodies, and though they were consistently dwarfed by the size of the space, there was little doubt that this was their space and that they were in control.



"Juice" at the Guggenheim Museum, 1969 Meredith Monk (Photo by V. Sladon)

All of this sounds like an unconsidered hodgepodge of unrelated concepts, and it may have been that if not grounded by Ms. Monk's musical compositions. Her work is itself a series of contradictions, its repetitive, haunting fugues are undercut constantly by a playful melodicism which might then grow more discordant and frenetic, all morphing naturally, unfolding from itself. The influence of Asian and primitive culture is apparent in the vocals, which are exclusively onomatopoeic (a whole performance without one full word!), frequently delivered through call-and-response, and always sudden and extreme, somewhere between primitive calls to peace and schoolyard taunts. Working in intuitive sync with the music, the entire performance had a transformative effect in which any audience member could create his or

her own associations or narratives, and which left me, by the end of this first phase, viscerally engaged and vaguely unsettled.

The second phase invited the audience up onto the museum ramps amongst the exhibit, where 22 simultaneous mini-installations were repeated with variations, constantly shifting. There was a variety of styles: frenetic modern dance, performers sitting silent in a pose of mourning, two young girls playing stylized childhood games, and several performers moving slowly and deliberately, either in vestibules or amongst the crowd, each with a sense of paranoia about them. And all to the music, quieter now, in its solemnity, maintaining the uneasy tone of this forlorn world that they had created.

Beats me how anyone knew it was time, but we suddenly found ourselves standing along the railing, looking down at the lobby now deserted except for Ms. Monk and her accordion, captured by a single spotlight. She began this third phase singing alone, until she stood and called up amongst the ramps in her inimitable animalistic chants, her hands forming a funnel around her mouth, in the same mixture of joy and sadness that had defined the night, calling up to her brethren to join her in this new clearing. From my spot near the very top of the topmost ramp, I watched them move, with no sense of urgency, down through the different rotundas until they joined her in the center, and the music began anew, louder and more expansive than before, some of the singers remaining amongst us to answer their calls until all the ground performers lay down one-by-one and the lights faded.

It was downright bizarre to hear the applause that followed. I had, for so long, been drawn not into a show but into a different world, and the conventional finish felt out of place. The show's profundity was not in how well-prepared or realized it was, but in its pervasive effect. I felt, by the end, terribly sad and alone, detached from everyone around me even as we moved amongst one another -- not particularly strange considering that our perception of the work was entirely defined by our particular vantage points.



'Songs of Ascension' in Sonoma, California, 2008 Meredith Monk Vocal Ensemble (Photo by Marion Gray)

Never did the sense escape me that this was something I have never seen before and will never see again. Ms. Monk says she long ago became "inspired and encouraged by the notion of art as offering and spiritual practice in Asian culture."

What I experienced -- and again, only from my vantage point is this true -- was offering and ceremony that engendered in me the most basic, primitive, visceral feelings -- ones that may later be approximated but will never precisely strike me again.